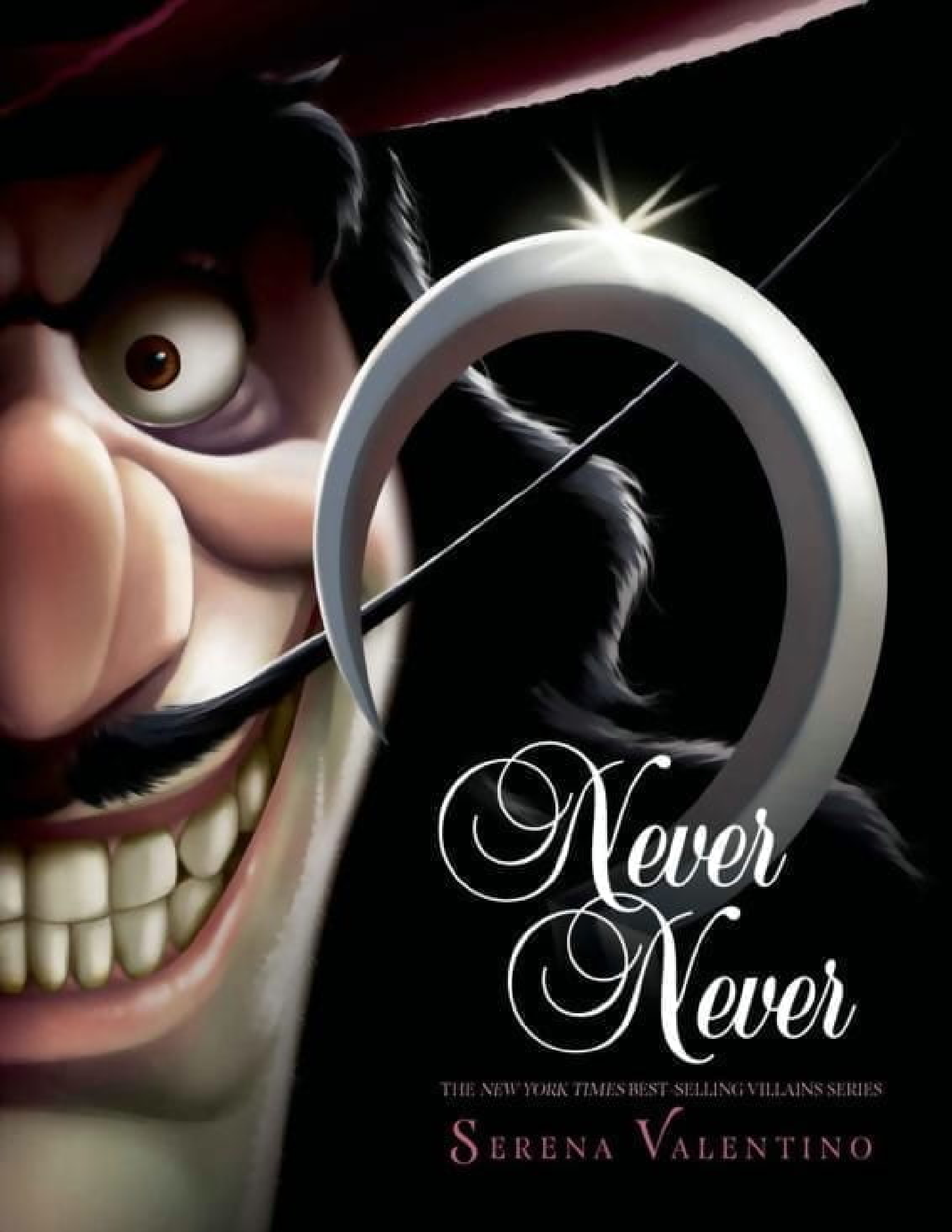
Never Never
THE NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING VILLAINS SERIES
SERENA VALENTINO

Never Never

A Tale of Captain Hook

By Serena Valentino

Disney • Hyperion
Los Angeles • New York

Copyright © 2022 by Disney Enterprises, Inc.

All rights reserved. Published by Disney • Hyperion, an imprint of Buena Vista Books, Inc. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher. For information address Disney • Hyperion, 77 West 66th Street, New York, New York 10023.

First Edition, July 2022

Designed by Phil T. Buchanan
Library of Congress Control Number: 2022931027
ISBN 978-1-368-08213-6

Visit www.DisneyBooks.com

Contents

Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Prologue
Chapter I
Chapter II
Chapter III
Chapter IV
Chapter V
Chapter VI
Chapter VII
Chapter VIII
Chapter IX
Chapter X
Chapter XI
Chapter XII
Chapter XIII
Chapter XIV
Chapter XV
Chapter XVI
Epilogue

Dedicated to my lovely readers for their unwavering love, support, and enthusiasm for this series. I love and appreciate you more than you could possibly imagine. Thank you.

Prologue

From the Book of Fairy Tales

Captain James Hook

Captain James Hook would like it known he is the bravest man to ever hoist a pirate flag. We know the truth, however. We see clearly into the changeable hearts of men, and we write their stories. We are the Odd Sisters; powerful witches, the creators of fates, and the authors of this Book of Fairy Tales. If you're reading our stories in the order we have preordained, then you will remember we are in the Place Between—the place between the land of the living and the land beyond the veil. Though much time has passed since our daughter Circe sacrificed herself to save the Many Kingdoms, we still find ourselves trapped in this place, with only one of our magic mirrors to show us what is happening in the outside world. Not that we need it—these stories are etched on our souls, for we have written them, and we have found ways to make our influence felt in the Many Kingdoms, and in the outside realms. But enough of our tale for now. This is Captain James Hook's story.

James wasn't always the man he is today, constantly thwarted by the Lost Boys, outsmarted by their impish leader Peter Pan, or besieged by a deep and abiding fear of a menacing crocodile with a clock ticking away in its belly. As hard as it may be to fathom, there was a time when James was a very brave soul, and one of the most feared and respected pirates to sail the Seven Seas. Those stories however have been eclipsed by his misadventures in Never Land, by his reputation for being a cowardly "grown-up." Our story focuses on what happened before James made his way to Never Land, because you already know what happens once he got there. The adventures of Peter Pan and his nemesis Captain Hook are widely known, but what you don't know is how James became Captain Hook, and how it was he came upon that name.

James wasn't born to pirate life. He was raised in London, a rather mundane non-magical realm where he was son to a grand lord and lady, well before the time of Lady Tremaine and Cruella de Vil, but not so dissimilar from their own upbringings. You will notice that the last three entries in this Book of Fairy Tales have worked their way back in time rather than moving forward, but as you will soon learn, time means nothing in the magical realms, and even less so to those who rule the lands where the magic is as dense as the Dead Woods in the Many Kingdoms.

As with most children in aristocratic households, James's daily care was left in the hands of a nurse, a nanny who attended to the child's every need. On one of their daily strolls in the park, James's nurse found her attentions diverted from her charge, and returned to find James had disappeared from his pram (or stroller, depending where in the world you are reading this).

As you can imagine, James's disappearance sent panic into the hearts of his family. Little James was missing for six days. For his parents, it was six gut-wrenching days. But by all accounts they were the most glorious six days of James's entire life, and have remained so to this day.

In all our time chronicling fairy tales in this book, one of the most delightful things we've learned about London is that for a non-magical realm, it is often touched by other worlds' magic. For instance, when a boy falls out of his pram in London, he is transported to a place called Never Land. If the child is not claimed by his parents within seven days, that is where he will stay, and thereafter be known as a Lost Boy.

It makes sense to us, for who else would be the caretakers for young boys? Certainly not the high fairies of the Fairylands, whose attentions are devoted almost entirely to young girls (all but the Blue Fairy, but she is the exception in more ways than this), and we witches don't have time for the likes of grubby little boys. We suppose that is why the Fairy Council sent one of their unruly fairies, a tinker fairy by the name of Tinker Bell, to care for the boys in Never Land. Two birds with one stone, as they say: the Fairy Council has someone care for the little troublemakers who refuse to grow up *and* they rid themselves of a fairy whom the Fairy Godmother and Three Good Fairies did not approve of. This is not unusual in the Fairylands, as you may have read or will read in this tome should you decide to explore it. But we will waste no more time on the likes of the Fairy Godmother and her ilk here. Instead we will focus on James, and his quest to find Never Land.

To us, Never Land was a trifling place, filled with ill-tempered and foolhardy young boys who wish never to grow up—and somehow never do. That seemed to be the extent of the magic there as far as we knew, aside from Tinker Bell's magic fairy dust, so it didn't bother us that we were forbidden by the Fairy Council to travel there. But when James started to get our attention, our gaze shifted upward to the second star to the right, and straight on till morning.

As you can imagine, a place such as Never Land appealed to young James.

When he fell out of his pram in London, he spent six days in Never Land. It was a place of high adventure, where he ran around in animal skins and got up to all sorts of tomfoolery with the Lost Boys. It was far more appealing than his life in London with his stuffy nurse. He would have stayed there happily for the rest of his days, but unfortunately, on the sixth day, his parents found him and brought him home. If he had remained missing just one day longer, Never Land would have claimed him, and he would have remained a Lost Boy forever. But his destiny was to grow up.

James would never get over leaving Never Land behind. Visions of the life and the adventures he could have had stayed with him, haunting him to the point of obsession into adulthood. He made it his life's quest to return to Never Land, and he never gave up on his search.

As he grew older James made it his mission to learn everything he could about Never Land and how to find it again, but the secrets of Never Land were always out of reach. He found nothing but rumors that sounded like children's stories, chronicling the adventures of Peter Pan—adventures James felt should have been his own, and that had been stolen unjustly from him when he was found and brought home. And just as he was about to lose hope of ever finding Never Land again, like magic James found stories of pirates sitting on the shelves of his father's library. He was intrigued by these dastardly pirates who were said to sail to mysterious and magical lands. He found himself enamored of these tales of the brave seafaring men and women who traveled the high seas looking for treasure and having adventures, in his world and beyond.

Of course this wouldn't do for James's parents, who raised him to be a proper young gentleman. He was sent to the finest schools, first Eton and then Balliol College, Oxford, and upon graduation he was expected to find a wealthy young woman to marry. Like so many titled families, James's parents were burdened with the upkeep of a large estate and grounds without the money to do so. Of course they wouldn't stoop to working, so their only option was finding the daughter of a wealthy family so they might save the family estate. But James had other plans in mind. He was going to become a pirate.

James read every book he could get his hands on about pirates and their ships, and made it his mission to be able to impress the most seasoned of pirates with his extensive knowledge of cartography, navigation, ship rigging, artillery, and order of accession in the ranks, and of course he became acquainted with their skullduggerous and dastardly ways through the

stories of their exploits and adventures. His time at Eton and Balliol College proved helpful in his research. He had read everything in his father's library when he was quite young, and was happy to have a whole new world of books at his disposal in the vast and expansive libraries while away at school. But there was something else his education and obsessive reading did for James that he did not expect. He became an excellent storyteller, and found that he could speak with authority on almost any subject, as he was able to substantiate his opinions with the facts he easily remembered from the numerous books he had devoured over the years. In other words, he was a good talker, which was one of his greatest sources of pride. The more James read about pirates, the more he became convinced that if anyone could help him find Never Land it would be a pirate. He could think of no one else who had seen more of the world, or met more interesting people. What James didn't expect is that his adventures would eventually bring him to the Many Kingdoms, a truly magical place unlike any other. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

James's true adventure started on the evening of his graduation from Balliol College. His family shouldn't have been surprised when their butler brought them the farewell letter James had left for them in his bedroom near a stack of pirating books that evening, but they were nevertheless shocked and horrified. Who wasn't surprised however was their butler, because it was he who had truly known James's heart since he was a young lad.

When James's father read the letter aloud, James's mother all but fainted, and then, in true aristocratic fashion, she took to her room for several weeks afterward, heartbroken that her only son could bring such shame upon his family.

Dearest Mama and Papa,

Today I embark on my true calling. By the time you read this I will hopefully be well on my way to fulfilling my dream, testing my mettle against treacherous seas, and even more dangerous enemies, while searching for the ever elusive Never Land, where I feel I truly belong. I fight a battle within my heart that keeps me from resenting you for claiming me before I would become a Lost Boy. I remind myself you only did so out of love for me, but I cannot bring myself to live the life you have planned. Please know that I have not forsaken you, and I do not shirk my duties to our family. I have found a way to live the life I want while fulfilling my duties to you. I am to be

a pirate. Rest assured I shall send you my plunder as I search the seas in my quest to find Never Land.

Yours faithfully,

James

Chapter I

The Crusty Toad

James couldn't have looked more out of place when he walked into the Crusty Toad, an infamous establishment in the worst part of London, where pirates were known to frequent. It was a shabby place, with filthy, oil-stained wood floors and tables, dimly lit, and filled with the roughest men James had ever laid eyes on. All of his reading couldn't have prepared him for the likes of men he encountered that evening. It had, however, prepared him for how to dress and speak properly while in the company of pirates, and he was rather pleased he had gone to the trouble of outfitting himself properly and learning their jargon. He was pleased he had taken the time to research the correct livery to serve on a pirate ship, and made it his business to acquire it at a little shop on Eaton Square with all manner of intriguing items with interesting tales, including the dashing black pirate coat he was wearing that evening. All of the men assembled were rather rough looking, with clothes that were worn down from wear and battle. James felt he stuck out in his brand-new livery, and though he went to great lengths not to pick out the fanciest of the coats he had spied in the shop, he still managed to look much

more finely dressed than the other men there. There were a couple of pirates in particular who looked well-seasoned and nastier than the rest, who seemed to take an interest in James when he walked into the Crusty Toad—a bushy bearded pirate with dark hair, and a ginger-haired scallywag with a fresh, gruesome-looking wound on his face. James didn't let his gaze linger long on the dastardly-looking men, for fear of offending them. Instead, he focused his gaze straight ahead. He took a deep breath as he was met by jeering laughs while walking past the pirates, likely due to his pristine and newly acquired white pirate shirt, long black belted frock coat with bright silver buttons, and shiny black pirate boots he had only just procured earlier that week.

James was reminded again of the little shop on Eaton Square with all manner of curiosities that had piqued his interest, but he had been there to buy a proper pirate's outfit and he was rather pleased with his purchase. He had almost bought a red belted frock coat with gold trim, but he resisted trying it on because he knew if he saw himself in it he would buy the thing, and he knew the moment he saw the coat it was something fit for a captain. Maybe one day when he had worked his way up in the ranks and become a captain he would return for it, but for the meantime, he told himself he was pleased with his outfit. He was proud of it, really—that is, he was until all the pirates in the Crusty Toad looked at him as if he was an interloper, or some sort of impostor. *Never mind*, he thought. Perhaps they were simply jealous he had outfitted himself so well.

James took a seat in a dark corner, laying his small sack of belongings beside him on the wooden bench, and pulled out a book to read from his sack. He hesitated before putting it down, seeing, even in the dim candlelight, that the wooden table was greasy. He took out his handkerchief and put it on the table so the grime wouldn't sully his beloved book. Just as he opened his book, an older woman with long wild gray hair approached him. She was wearing a blue dress cinched tightly with a green bodice that was heavily soiled and stained for lack of wearing an apron.

"What can I get you, guv'nah?" her voice croaked, and James wondered if this was the establishment's namesake, because to James she looked and sounded like a crusty toad.

"What do you recommend?" he asked, causing the old woman's croaky laugh to fill the room.

"You are a precious one, aren't you, dear? Are you sure you're in the right place?" she asked, appearing rather amused, and glancing back at the

pirates across the room who were laughing and looking in James's direction.

"I am quite sure," he said with a saucy smirk, hoping the pirates heard him.

"The likes of these men don't appreciate being mocked, especially by those who believe themselves to be their betters," she said, leaning in rather too close and making James uncomfortable. He tried to back away from her, almost toppling off the bench, which made the wild-haired woman and the pirates laugh again. The sound of their raspy and rough laughs sent a chill through him, but he straightened up and spoke with authority.

"I assure you, dear woman, I am doing no such thing." He righted himself on the bench again. "I am like any other man here," he said, fluffing the cuffs of his shirt, seeing he had done nothing to convince the old woman he belonged there.

"Okay, dearie. You can't say I didn't warn you. What can I get you, then?" she asked, shaking her head. James could tell she thought he was out of place, which made him worry the other pirates in the room probably felt the same.

There were several small tables scattered around the room, and one large one in the middle, around which most of the patrons were sitting together. It was a rather motley crew of pirates, and while many were laughing and swapping stories, a few of them were looking over at James menacingly. One, the ginger-haired pirate with the large gash on his face, seemed particularly interested in him. James did his best not to give the man more than another passing glance and focused his gaze on the serving woman croaking away at him.

"Bring me the specialty of the house, and a round of refreshments for everyone here," James said, raising his voice so the pirates could hear him, which got him little more than a few raised eyebrows and glances from the pirates sitting at a large table across the room.

"Sure thing, guv'nah," she said, walking away from the table muttering something under her breath that James could not hear for the rasp of her croaky voice, and the laughter coming from the rambunctious group of pirates.

James felt, all things considered, he was off to a good start. He had managed to procure himself a proper pirate's outfit, he'd found the place in which they congregated between campaigns, and now all he had to do was get himself a position on one of their ships. Things were going exactly as he had planned, and he was feeling quite pleased with himself.

Just then someone came bursting through the double wooden doors of the establishment, bellowing James's name over and over. All eyes turned to the squat little man with his gray hair in his butler's uniform.

"Master James, Master James, are you here?" called the portly little man as he looked frantically around the room.

James was mortified. His stomach dropped as the room went silent, making James sink down in his seat, realizing everyone was now looking at him. This was not how he wanted things to go. He had intended to strike up a conversation with some of the men once the serving woman brought out their drinks. This was going all wrong.

"Master James, what are you playing at?" asked the little man, his face now red and his brow wet with sweat. "Why on earth are you here of all places?"

"Yeah, *Master James*, what *are* you playing at?" asked one of the pirates at the large, round table. This didn't look like the sort of man James wanted to offend, so he didn't respond. He was starting to regret having come there at all.

"So, the young master decided he wanted to play at pirates?" said another pirate, laughing and slapping one of his mates on the back, making him spill his drink as he was taking a sip.

"Looks like he's mistaken this for a fancy dress party!" another man at the table joined in.

James was utterly abased. This wasn't how he expected his adventure to start out, or the impression he wanted to make; it had all gone terribly wrong, and he didn't know how to fix it. Luckily the croaky old woman arrived with a tray of refreshments just in time. She set the tray on the table in front of the pirates and said, "Courtesy of Master James." All the pirates raised their tankards, smashing them into each other.

"To the dread pirate Master James!" they jeered.

James could feel his face getting hot. These men were laughing at him, but he supposed it was better than being thrown out before his adventure had even started.

"Cheers to you, gentlemen!" he said, raising his glass, then he set it down roughly on the table, directing a glare at his butler. "Sit down, Mr. Smee, you've brought too much ill attention to me already," he said, rolling his eyes. "What are you doing here?" He flashed a glance at the big table to see if the pirates were still paying him mind.

Mr. Smee scoffed. “What am I doing here? What are *you* doing here, sir? Your mother is beside herself with grief and worry. It’s as if she’s been transported in time to when you were a boy again, lost for those six days.” James could see the man truly was worried about him, but he doubted his parents cared for anything more than the scandal it would bring to the family if it ever got out that he had gone off to become a pirate.

“And I suppose they’ve sent you to find me? What am I thinking, of course they did. They wouldn’t dare bring notoriety on their great house. What would their friends think if they knew?” James laughed ruefully. Smee didn’t answer; he just gave James a look that was all too familiar, one that he had been giving James since he was a child. A mixture of pity and concern.

“What did Papa say when he read the letter?” James asked with a bit of the devil in his eye. “No, wait, let me guess, something along the lines of ‘A pirate? What sort of poppycock is this?’ Am I right?” James laughed heartily, but Smee wasn’t amused.

“If you don’t mind my asking, sir, how do you intend to become a pirate anyway? I suppose you’re just sitting here waiting to be thingamajigged or whatever you call it?” asked Smee, brow furrowed above his red face. The poor man was sweating as if he had run the entire way there.

“It’s called *shanghaied*, Smee,” James said under his breath, hoping the pirates at the large table would lose interest if they could no longer hear his conversation. “Smee, my good man, why are you in such a state?” asked James, changing the subject.

“Looking for you, Master James. I’ve been running around London searching for you,” he said, wiping the sweat from his brow.

“Leave it to my parents to send you out into the dark of night, on foot. They could have at least provided a carriage,” said James, shaking his head. But Smee’s focus was still on James.

“So what is your plan then, getting shanghaied?” asked Smee loudly, making the large group of pirates laugh.

“Of course not; don’t be ridiculous,” James said, wanting nothing more in that moment than the ability to make himself disappear. He hated that Smee’s theatrics were drawing the wrong sort of attention from the very men he was there to impress. He had played this night out in his mind so many times over the years, and this was not what he had imagined. He hadn’t even started on his journey and it was already a failure.

The ginger-haired pirate at the other end of the room was paying particular attention to his conversation with Smee, having been making mocking gestures and pulling faces since James arrived. “Lord Fancy Breeches here wants to be a pirate!” said the man, playacting like he was a great lord and not a battle-worn pirate. He had a long ginger beard and small, round intense eyes, and the gash that ran across his face looked as if someone had tried to cleave him in half. “Good luck finding a captain who will let the likes of you on his ship. I wouldn’t let the son of a biscuit eater like you swab my deck!” he said, making the other men at his table laugh so hard some of them spit out their drinks.

James had been raised in the same fashion of others of his rank, to never show emotion, and to always keep calm no matter the situation. But this pirate bruised his ego, and it sent a surge of anger and pride through him that he had not expected. Because he knew he was a better pirate than any of these men. Even if he had never put it into practice, he was a man who knew what he was about.

“Indeed you wouldn’t, good sir!” said James, standing up and snapping the lapels of his coat to punctuate his words. “An old salt such as yourself has more sense than that, because I am no swabbie, sir!” James raised his voice and stood to meet their gaze, but the pirates laughed even harder.

He could feel Smee pulling at his coat sleeve, trying to get him to sit down again, but James was feeling brave, and he wasn’t going to let anything stand in the way of finding Never Land. He had read everything there was to know about pirating, and he wasn’t going to let these salty old men intimidate him. He had been dreaming of this his entire life. This was his chance; he wasn’t going to waste it. He needed to show these men what he was made of, and do what he did best.

Talk.

“I’ll have you know I am a master of cartography, and I have extensive and intimate knowledge of ship anatomy and weaponry!” said James, not backing down even though he was now face-to-face with the ginger-haired pirate, who had come over to James’s table. Upon closer inspection James could see the man’s face was still healing from the massive wound, which was festering, and smelled foul when he leaned in close to talk to James. It was as if his face were two separate entities trying to merge, and James found himself repulsed when the salty old man spoke to him.

“Do you know what this fool is talking about? He’s talking nonsense,” said the pirate, raising his voice so the others could hear him even though he

spoke his words directly into James's face.

But James didn't let the unseemly man intimidate him. He stood proudly and continued speaking.

"I beg to differ. I am a graduate of Balliol College, and I am not talking nonsense, sir, and I assure you I know exactly what I'm about," said James, standing his ground and refusing to back away from the ginger pirate's foul breath.

"Balliol College, you say? Well, that makes all the difference in the world! What every ship needs is a headmaster," said another pirate with a long brown beard that looked to have the texture of dried, mossy twigs. The other pirates laughed as they got up and made their way to James's table. Smee looked nervous, but James kept making his case.

"I have read every book there is on the subject of pirates and their ships, and I assure you, I would be an asset to any crew," said James, holding his head high and bursting with pride, making all the pirates laugh even harder.

"I agree!" said a deep gravelly voice from a dark corner of the room, the sound of which made all of the men stop laughing, and caused the ginger-haired and woolly-bearded pirates to back away from James, and indeed the mysterious man, in fear.

"Aye, perhaps you're right, sir," said the ginger-haired pirate, nudging his friend. James could see the other pirates in the room were fearful of this man, so much that the mere sound of his voice sent them quickly back to their tables.

"I am looking for a bosun, and I could use an educated man like you." The man with the deep gravelly voice emerged from the shadows. As he made his way across the room to James, the other pirates shifted uncomfortably and sat back down at their own table. He was a tall, heavily built man dressed entirely in black, with long black hair and a beard. His face was weathered, exceedingly lined, and his eyes were dark and intense. James knew at once who this man was, though the illustrations in the papers didn't do him justice.

"It's an honor to meet you, Captain Blackbeard. I am James," he said, reaching out his hand.

Blackbeard laughed. It was a deep jolly laugh that lit up his face in a way James hadn't expected.

"James? That's a terrible name for a pirate," he said. "So tell me, James, why do you want to be a pirate?" He took a seat next to Smee,

pushing the poor man awkwardly against the wall, and James soon followed.

"I want to find Never Land," James said, wishing at once he hadn't. The last thing he wanted was to sound foolish. It was his dream to serve with the likes of Blackbeard, and he couldn't believe his luck running into him here. He didn't want to mess it up with talk of fairy tales. Blackbeard was one of the most feared, respected, and ferocious pirates James had ever read about. He could hardly believe he was talking to him, let alone being considered as one of his crew. He couldn't believe his luck, or how congenial the man was. He wasn't at all like James had imagined him to be when he'd read about his exploits.

"That's as good a reason as I've ever heard, and the most honest, I wager. But let's put your knowledge to the test, shall we, and prove once and for all you are a man who knows what he's about." James could see a devious twinkle in Blackbeard's eye, and knew this was more about putting on a show for the other pirates in the room, who all remained silent for fear of Blackbeard's wrath.

"It would be an honor, sir." James snapped the cuffs of his pirate shirt, smoothed his lapels, and braced himself for Blackbeard's questions.

"What is the proper name for the skull and crossbones that appear on flags on ships such as mine?"

"A Jolly Roger, sir! Though the origin of the name is steeped in mystery. There is much debate how that name came about. Though I like to think it is derived from *Old Roger*, an old term for Hades."

Blackbeard smiled at the answer, eyeing the other pirates, who were listening intently and scowling, but not daring to say a word. James could see Blackbeard's reputation was well earned, and just the slightest glance of disapproval put all the men in their place.

"What does the term *walk the plank* mean?"

"Well, sir, though many like to romanticize the notion of men such as yourselves making their foes walk the plank, it isn't a true pirate custom, is it? My research says you'd much rather just kill the person outright, have them keelhauled, or just simply throw them overboard."

Blackbeard laughed heartily. "Right you are! And what is *keelhauled*?"

"That, sir, is punishing someone by dragging them through the water by the keel of the ship from bow to stern. And I might add the word is derived from the Dutch word *kielhalen*."

"Yes, James, that is enough on keelhauling. What is the pirate's rule of code?"

“If I’m not mistaken, sir, each ship has its own rules of conduct to be decided upon by its captain and agreed to by the crew. I look forward to having the opportunity of learning yours.”

“What is more valuable, a treasure map or a sailing chart?”

“Being a master of cartography, I would say a sailing chart, sir, never mind that pirates aren’t usually in the business of burying their treasure or foolhardy enough to make a map that would lead someone to it should it fall into a thief’s hands. Treasure is usually kept aboard and divided amongst the crew.”

“Who is the most terrifying pirate in the world?”

“That would be Edward Teach, sir. Which is rather apropos, since I would be honored to receive such an excellent education from one such as yourself while serving as part of your crew should you decide to take me on.” This time the fear of upsetting Blackbeard didn’t quell the other pirates’ laughter and jeering.

“Everyone knows Blackbeard is the most feared pirate in the world!” said the ginger-haired pirate, but before James could correct him one of his mates elbowed him roughly and said under his breath, “That is Blackbeard’s name.”

Blackbeard shook his head and laughed. James could see this great hulking beast of a man was impressed by his knowledge, and maybe even liked him, or at the very least was amused by him. Whatever the case, James hoped it had earned himself a place on Blackbeard’s ship.

“We are setting sail at first light, if you’d like to join my crew,” said Blackbeard. Then he added, “And I suppose you know what a bosun is then, considering all your reading?”

“Yes, sir, I do! It will be my honor to supervise your equipment and crew.” James could not believe he was actually having this conversation with a pirate he had read so much about, and the very captain he had hoped to meet. It was as if it had been planned this way, as if it had already been determined this was the path he was supposed to take, and it made him feel as if he was making the right choice.

“It’s about time I have someone with a lick of sense serving at my side. My men are capable sailors and fighters, there’s no doubt about that, but they aren’t great thinkers. I could use someone like you,” he said, giving James a wink. “Oh and James, if you bring this butler of yours, do find him something more appropriate to wear. I have a feeling you’re going to have a

Hades of a time with my other hands already, without them knowing your butler is aboard." Blackbeard smiled and shook his head.

"Aye, sir!" said James, unable to keep himself from grinning. He was one step closer to realizing his dream, and he wondered what the next day would bring.

Chapter II

A Pirate's Life for Smee

Smee anxiously waited for James to meet him on the dock so they could board Blackbeard's daunting ship, the *Silent Wraith*, together. It was a massive black ship with black sails that were billowing in the wind like dancing ghosts. The most frightening aspect was the large carving of a skeleton, the ship's guardian, which adorned the bow.

This was the last turn Smee expected his life to take when he embarked on his career in service to a great home so many years ago. He started out like most young servant men do in a large, impressive house, as a boot-boy. He worked his way up through the ranks, showing that he was capable, diligent, and dependable, and most of all loyal to the family, and he was proud he was promoted to footman, and eventually to butler. Now he was joining a pirate's crew. He even looked the part: James had found him an ill-fitting blue-and-white-striped shirt, blue short-pants, and a jaunty red cap. He felt ridiculous. And none of it felt quite real.

As he stood there trying to quiet the butterflies in his stomach and the nagging voice in his head that he was being foolhardy to set off on such a

dangerous mission, he quickly reminded himself that he was doing so to keep James protected. Smee could hardly blame James for wanting something more for his life; he was not suited for the one his parents had planned for him. They had never understood their son, but to their credit James didn't seem very interested in his parents, either.

Nevertheless Mr. Smee took a fatherly interest in James, and did his best to help the lad when he could. All James cared about were his books. But Smee had a special fondness in his heart for James. He had always been an odd little boy who loved nothing more than reading, and aside from constantly falling out of his pram as a child, he really was a good boy. But then James had a reason for falling out of prams as often as he did, which he shared with Smee one rainy afternoon when his nurse brought James home. She was rain-soaked and crying.

"I don't know why Master James is always falling out of his pram. I swear, Mr. Smee, I think he is doing it on purpose," she said, standing there with a strained look on her face and tears in her eyes. Smee had seen this look on several of James's previous nurses, of which he had had many. It wouldn't be long before this one gave notice. Not that James needed a nurse at that point. At five years old, it was time for him to have a governess, and long past the time for prams.

"Now, there, there, don't cry. Why don't I take Master James upstairs while you change out of those wet clothes?" said Smee. The nurse smiled weakly at him as she headed up the stairs to her room. His nurses always looked defeated after the young master fell out of his pram, and who could blame them?

It was only on these occasions, after James was marched home by his nurse, that Smee could describe the young master as disagreeable or sullen. Smee had always assumed it was because falling out of a pram had to be a very unpleasant experience. This hadn't been the first time one of James's nurses suggested he was falling out on purpose, but it was the first time Mr. Smee took it into consideration.

Once they were up in James's room, Mr. Smee broached the subject with him. "Now, Master James, Nurse says you've fallen out of your pram on purpose again. Is this true?"

"Of course it's true, Mr. Smee! How else am I to get back to Never Land?"

Now you may think this is very advanced vocabulary for one young enough to be pushed around in a pram, and usually we would agree, at least

for a mortal child; however, there was a logical reason for this. James's parents and caretakers had been rather overprotective since James went missing for those six days, so he was being pushed around in a pram for far longer than customary, and by all accounts James was a very gifted and precocious young fellow. Even though he was perhaps five years old at the time, you wouldn't know it by speaking with him—you'd swear he was much older. It must have been strange for young James, being treated like a baby but spoken to like an adult, but one couldn't help but speak with James as such because of his personality and great vocabulary for one so young.

"What nonsense is this, then, Master James? Never Land indeed! What an imagination you have!" Smee said, ringing the bell for an upstairs maid.

"It's true, Smee. I've been there. It's the most magical place. I never had so much fun as I did there," James said, and Smee could tell the lad was telling the truth, or thought that he was. As far as Smee knew there was nothing false about James. He always told the truth. Sometimes to a fault.

"And what does falling out of your pram have to do with Never Land, may I ask?" he questioned as he took out a clean set of clothes for James.

"That's how boys get to Never Land, Smee! They fall out of their prams, and if they're not collected within seven days, that's where they stay."

"And how are they collected?" Smee couldn't help but be intrigued.

"Their mothers collect them, of course, just like Mama did with me."

"What would have happened if she had never collected you, or tried to after the seven days?"

"She would have gone on searching for me to no avail, for that is when Never Land claims you forever, on the seventh day."

"Well, thank goodness her ladyship found you, Master James. I don't know what we would do if you were lost to us forever."

"I do! I would be playing with my friends in Never Land," said James.

Smee smiled at the boy, wondering where he had gotten such ideas. He supposed it didn't hurt for young James to have such fanciful notions. *What could it hurt?* he thought, and of course it wasn't too long before James was simply too old to be pushed around in a pram, and had to give up the notion of finding Never Land by that method.

When James no longer had the option of falling out of prams, that's when the excessive reading began. But that didn't seem like a terrible thing to Smee either, even though it did seem to annoy his parents. They wished that James enjoyed things other young men in their circle enjoyed, but

hunting foxes didn’t inspire James, and neither did sitting in drawing rooms making polite conversation.

Smee laughed while remembering those days, and marveled that he was surprised to find himself about to join a pirate crew with the young master. He couldn’t count how many times James was sent up to his room because of his obsessive talk of pirates at dinner no matter how dignified their guests, or how many pirate plays Mr. Smee and the other servants watched as James acted out his favorite battle scenes while wearing a long black fake beard, pretending to be his favorite pirate. Nothing distracted James from his passions, no matter what his parents threatened, or how they punished him. There came a time when James was left at school for the holidays because his parents couldn’t fathom having to deal with his incessant talk of his passions, but Smee knew that wasn’t a punishment for James, who preferred the uninterrupted reading time over the tiresome parade of titled guests his parents expected him to charm. Of course James could charm them if he wanted—Smee was certain James could do anything he set his mind to—but his young master was singularly focused, and all of his attentions were entirely devoted to his dream of finding Never Land.

Smee often took his holiday during this time, and would secretly visit James at school, bringing him books he knew he would enjoy, and a hamper stuffed with treats from their cook. Smee loved this time with James, when it was just the two of them, and he could listen to him for hours talking about all the topics that inspired him. Smee had no doubt James knew everything there was to being a pirate, but there was no way Smee would let him venture off into the great unknown on his own, even if he was a grown man now. For in Smee’s mind, James would always be the little boy who fell out of his pram.

Smee was brought out of his musings when the very grown-up James finally made his way to the dock. Smee saw him turning the corner, the sound of James’s boots clicking on the wood, and James’s black velvet coat swishing in the wind. Smee thought James looked every bit a pirate, and had confidence James would prove himself to be a capable member of Blackbeard’s crew. Smee took a deep breath, and was taken aback that he was feeling proud of James. Here he was embarking on this journey with such bravery, leaving everything he knew behind to fulfill his dream. In fact, Smee couldn’t be prouder.

“Master James, you make a dashing pirate,” said Smee, smiling.

“That’s because I *am* a dashing pirate, Mr. Smee,” said James with a smirk.

“Too right, Master James. It seems we both are now,” said Smee, wishing James had found something more dignified for him to wear.

“You don’t have to come with me, Mr. Smee,” said James. “It’s not too late to change your mind.” But Smee wouldn’t hear of it.

“Your parents would never forgive me if I came home without you, sir. And I would never forgive myself if something happened and I wasn’t there to protect you. No, we’re in this together,” said Smee, lifting his head high.

“Let us embark on our journey then, Mr. Smee! We are about to sail the perilous seas, and visit distant lands full of adventure. Who knows what awaits us! Dangerous foes, monstrous creatures, enchanted lands!” said James, his heart full of excitement.

“And let us not forget treasure, James, great heaps of wondrous treasure!” bellowed Blackbeard from the stern of the ship.

“Aye, sir! Permission to come aboard, Captain?” asked James in the old-fashioned way, which made Blackbeard chuckle.

“Permission granted, to you and Mr. Smee,” said Blackbeard with a wink.

And to his surprise Smee felt a terrible sense of dread, like they were making a drastic mistake, and in that moment he wanted nothing more than to grab his master by the hand and drag him back home again. It suddenly felt as if it were all too perfect, as if this had been planned long ago by some unseen force, and it sent a shudder through Smee, making him worry James was going down a dangerous path.

But he couldn’t bring himself to share his fears with James. All he could think of was the young boy crying in his bedroom because no matter how many times he fell out of his pram he couldn’t find Never Land again. How could Smee be the person to stand in the way of his dream? And he knew in his heart nothing could stand in James’s way, not even his old friend Mr. Smee. James would find Never Land no matter what the cost, and Smee wanted to be there to help James along the way.

Chapter III

The Great Leviathan

The *Silent Wraith* cut through the choppy waves like a specter floating on mist. There was something supernatural about Blackbeard's ship that James couldn't quite put his finger on. It had been nearly a year since James had joined Blackbeard's crew, but it was the first evening the captain had asked him to join him for dinner. Smee had taken over in the galley, giving orders to the men who worked below, and tending to James's and Blackbeard's every need. He had just brought in a feast for the two men, and Blackbeard was eating greedily, slopping the food into his beard, and wiping it with the cuff of his sleeve. James watched in silent horror as he picked at his own food.

James was hoping Blackbeard had asked him to dine with him because he was planning to ask him to be his first mate. The first mate usually dined with the captain, but they had lost Rusty Jones to another crew while in the Caribbean less than a fortnight ago, and now the position was vacant.

James was enjoying his life as a pirate even more than he expected, and though the crew hadn't exactly embraced him as truly one of their own, they

did at least seem to respect his skill and knowledge. Sitting in Blackbeard's quarters, he remembered the day Captain Blackbeard introduced him to the crew.

"Listen up! We have a new bosun. His name is . . . James. I want you to obey his orders just as you would if I gave them to you, do you understand? And by the gods, give him a proper pirate's name!" James recognized some of the men from the previous night, including the ginger-haired pirate with the deep wound on his face.

"I think you've already met my first mate, Rusty Jones," said Blackbeard, which made James sigh. He was the very pirate he had met in the Crusty Toad who seemed to dislike James the most.

"We've not met properly. I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Jones," said James. Rusty rolled his eyes and scowled. James could see Rusty wasn't pleased to have James on the crew. "I know we got off to a rocky start, but let me assure you, I intend to be an asset to this crew, and I will serve you and this ship faithfully. My extensive pirating knowledge is at your disposal, Mr. Jones. Feel free to come to me with your queries should you ever find the need," said James, making Rusty shake his head with disgust.

"I'll keep that in mind, *Headmaster*," Rusty said, and walked away.

"Pay him no mind, James. He's been in a foul mood since our run-in with Calico Jack's crew," said Blackbeard, making the other men laugh.

"I'll say. I'd be in a foul mood, too, if I let one woman get the better of me, let alone two," said Wibbles, a hulking man with a wide smile and bushy black sideburns and eyebrows.

"Do you mean Anne Bonny and Mary Read? They're notoriously good fighters. Mr. Jones shouldn't be ashamed; by everything I've read about them, Mr. Jones is lucky to have survived the experience," said James.

"Well, I wouldn't bring it up with him," said Wibbles, looking to see if Rusty was still in earshot.

"Well, he shouldn't be ashamed. Did you know some of the most formidable pirates are women? Take Grace O'Malley, now she was a bold woman—she requested an audience with Queen Elizabeth, demanding her brother and sons who had been captured be released, and the queen released them. Fancy that!" said James, feeling like he was at last in his element, talking about one of his greatest passions. But the men didn't seem interested.

"Thank you for the history lesson, *Professor*," said the friendliest-looking man in the crew. He had a gold earring, a large sharp nose, and a

yellow-and-red-striped shirt. “I’m Skylights, and this here is Bill Jukes, Turk, Mullins, Black Murphy, Starkey, and Damien Salt,” he said, motioning to the assembled men, who gave a grumble in reply.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, gentlemen,” said James, bowing to the men with a tip of his hat and a flourish with his hand that made all the men laugh heartily.

“Good evening, *Professor James*,” they all said in a mocking tone like petulant schoolchildren.

“That’s enough, men,” said Blackbeard. “Now get to your posts. We’re off to find ourselves the *Dreaded Queen*!”

Blackbeard’s voice brought James back to the present between taking great gulps from his tankard. “What were you thinking about, James?” he asked, spilling his drink on his long black beard.

“I was just musing about my first days here,” James said, his head still filled with the images the memories had conjured.

“You might go over better with the crew if you stopped using words like *musing*. Though I must say you’re better company than Rusty Jones,” said Blackbeard, laughing.

“I didn’t expect such fine dining on a pirate ship,” said James, changing the topic.

“And why shouldn’t we eat like kings?” said Blackbeard, pushing his bread into the meat juices and shoving it into his mouth, as James carefully cut his beef into bite-size pieces.

“You’ve become an impressive pirate, James. I knew you would be an asset to my crew. You handled yourself well in our scuffle with the *Dreaded Queen*,” he said, shoving another generous heap of food into his mouth.

“Thank you, sir,” said James, dabbing the corners of his mouth with his handkerchief.

“We’d be at the Floating Boneyard now if it weren’t for you. It was genius, the order you gave to Jukes. How did you know there was an excess of gunpowder in those barrels?” asked Blackbeard.

“You mentioned which port the *Dreaded Queen* was last rumored to visit, which is renowned for being one of the greatest suppliers in the region,” said James, feeling proud of his deduction.

“You’re a sharp one, James, I’ll give you that,” said Blackbeard.

“What’s the Floating Boneyard, sir? You said we’d be there now if things hadn’t gone our way,” asked James, pouring himself another drink.

“And so we would. If you hadn’t had Jukes blow up their gunpowder, we’d be lucky to have made the journey there. It’s a place where old ships go to die or be reborn. Pray we don’t have reason to visit there, not for some time,” said Blackbeard. “So what’s your story, James? I know you don’t like talking about your life before your time on my ship, but I would like to know you better.” The captain looked up from his plate, but did not give him a chance to answer. “Let me guess: Your parents are Lord and Lady Flouncypants, and they are back at home wringing their hands in grief because they fear you will bring scandal to their good names if anyone were to ever find out you’ve become a pirate,” said Blackbeard, stabbing a large piece of beef with his fork and shoving it into his mouth.

James laughed. “That about covers it, except you left out the part about marrying me off to the first wealthy young lady that would take me.”

“Well, that’s a given, my boy. My family tried to do the same after I finished my studies,” said Blackbeard, his mouth still full of food. “Don’t look so shocked, my dear lad. You’re not the first pirate with an education or to come from a good family. But I’m sure you knew that with all of your reading.” Blackbeard laughed deeply and gutturally.

“I hadn’t read that, sir. I find that most intriguing,” said James, feeling for the first time that he wasn’t an oddity in this new life he was living. He had longed for it for so many years, but never thought how lonely it might feel being surrounded by those who didn’t share his interest. It was somehow different from the loneliness he felt growing up. It made sense to him that his parents didn’t share his interests in pirating, but to finally achieve one of his fondest dreams and become a pirate, and learn he had no common ground with other pirates, was disappointing. He was happy at last that it seemed he had found a friend in Blackbeard, or at least that is how it felt to him in that moment, and he hoped they’d have more opportunities like this to get to know each other.

“You’ll soon learn most of our stories are quite the same, James. I’m sure you’ll find all of us are either running away from or running to something, or in your case both. Of course, I wouldn’t bet that many of the other men on the crew have backgrounds such as ours, and I’m almost sure you are the only pirate to bring his own butler aboard.” Blackbeard was clearly amused. “Have the men come up with any names for you, yet? One that you like, that is. I recall charging you with the mission of finding a proper pirate’s name, and here we are almost a year later and I am still calling you James.”

“None of the names the men have come up with sound particularly seaworthy, sir,” said James, making Blackbeard laugh.

“I can imagine,” the captain said, pouring James and himself a libation, and then splashing a bit to the floorboards of his quarters. “May the gods of the sea help you to find your pirate name then, James, and may you be worthy of it,” said Blackbeard. “So what have the men come up with so far?” Blackbeard seemed to be enjoying himself. He was like a friendly king in his domain, enjoying the feast Smee had prepared for them and laughing heartily. It seemed to James that Blackbeard’s quarters were quite kingly, with lanterns swaying overhead, and deep wood furnishings, including a massive mahogany bed. James wondered where Blackbeard had gotten such a bed, with its carved tentacles and enticing mermaids peering coyly at James as he took in the room. The most intriguing aspect was a wooden box that sat atop an ornately carved desk that matched the carvings on the bed. The box was compelling to James, with its mysterious carving of an eye that looked at him in a far less appealing manner than the mermaids.

“Well, sir, Damien Salt calls me *the Professor,* and *Headmaster* seems to be a favorite among the men, and then of course there is *Master James.* They still like to tease me, but the fact is there isn’t a man save yourself who knows more about ships and their weapons than I, and I won’t feel ashamed for sharing my knowledge.” James pretended to take it all in good stride, but the fact was he was disappointed none of the men took him seriously, even after showing himself to be a diligent and worthy member of the crew these last twelve months.

“Don’t let it rile you. It might help if you weren’t spouting facts at them all the time. These are seasoned men, James, they know what they’re about.”

But the fact was James thought by now he would have proven himself to the men, especially after their battle with the *Dreaded Queen*. He knew he had earned Blackbeard’s respect; he said as much after the battle was over, and said so again just now, but the men never seemed to remark on his achievements even when those included saving their lives.

James remembered that evening vividly, watching the *Dreaded Queen* sink into the ocean, its flames going out like a candle as it went under, and not a man save the captain commended him.

“You handled yourself well that night, James. You used your cunning and skill, and commanded the men well. I knew you’d be an asset to my crew, and I’m happy you proved me right. A time will come when you will be able to prove yourself to them with your actions and not your words.

You're a good crew member, you do your job well, and there is nothing wrong with that. But it's in the perils of great battle that bonds are made with pirates. Your day will come," said Blackbeard with a reassuring smile.

"Wasn't the ordeal with the *Dreaded Queen* a great battle?" asked James.

"Indeed it was; we would have succumbed to their cannon fire had you not thought to command Jukes to fire at their barrels of gunpowder, causing their ship to explode. There is no other ship with as much firepower as the *Dreaded Queen*, but luckily for us we have someone aboard who outsmarted them. But the men still see you as a scolding schoolmaster, James, not someone who will fight by their side."

"I don't know what else I can do to earn the men's respect and trust," said James, frowning.

"You've done so well this past year, and even if the other men don't show it, I know you've impressed them. Your knowledge has saved many lives in the short time you've been with us, and not just with the *Dreaded Queen*," said Blackbeard.

"Speaking of the *Dreaded Queen*, sir, shouldn't we go back—"

But their conversation was interrupted by a horrible crashing sound.

"Poseidon's beard, what was that?" asked Blackbeard, looking around. The ship was shaking violently, making the lanterns overhead sway from side to side, extinguishing some of the candles within.

"We're under siege!" said James, trying to steady himself. Just then a large tentacle burst through the side of the ship, and would have impaled James if he hadn't fallen down.

"Good gods, it's an *Architeuthis dux*!" James said, standing up and lending his hand to Blackbeard, who had also fallen to the floor.

"What are you on about now, James?" asked Blackbeard, getting back to his feet and looking at the gaping hole in the side of the ship, splinters of wood scattered around the cabin, his wooden dresser destroyed, and the wooden chest that was atop it lying open on the floor.

"The Ruling Squid, sir! A *Kraken*!" said James, making Blackbeard shake his head.

"This is no time for Latin lessons! Get yourself on deck, see if any of the men were injured, and assess the damage. I'll be right behind you!" said Blackbeard, rushing over to a chest that had been knocked over in the mayhem.

James emerged from below deck to chaos. The men were scrambling and in panic. One of the Kraken's tentacles had taken its hold around the ship, and another was inching its way up the crow's nest, where Smee had been situated. James could see poor Smee looking on in terror, determining if he should jump.

"Smee! What are you doing up there?" yelled James, but Smee didn't answer—he was focused on the encroaching tentacle slithering its way up toward him. "You stay put, Smee, I'll save you!" yelled James.

By James's account he could see just two tentacles, but he knew this creature was in possession of several more, and wouldn't hesitate to bring the ship down, and could do so easily within moments.

He had to act quickly.

James spied Bill Jukes positioning the cannon to fire on the tentacle that was wrapped around the ship and had Mullins pinned to the deck. Mullins was screaming, writhing in agony. Jukes would obliterate the poor man if he fired the cannon.

"Jukes, hold your fire! You'll take off Mullins's head and sink our ship!" James bellowed, as Blackbeard made his way up to the deck from his quarters. "Smee, hold tight! I'll save you," said James, seeing the tentacle creep closer to his friend.

"James is right, you son of a git! Stand down!" Blackbeard yelled, taking in the scene, and immediately rushed to Mullins and pulled him out from under the tentacle.

"Are you savvy, Mullins?" asked Blackbeard, his eyes darting around the deck to assess the situation.

"Aye, sir!" Mullins said, looking at his chest, which was covered in goo.

"You're lucky it slimed you, Mullins, or I wouldn't have been able to pull you free," said Blackbeard, wiping the slime from his hands on his shirt.

"Aye! Thank you, sir!" said Mullins, his eyes growing large at the sight of a third tentacle plunging through the starboard side of the ship, splintering the wood and causing the ship to shake violently as it took on water. Smee yelled out in terror from the crow's nest.

"Great Poseidon's Beard!" Mullins said, ducking as a large piece of splintered wood flew past his head. All the men hit the deck as the explosion of wood and water went in every direction. "Hold on, Smee! Hold on for dear life!"

“Mullins, Turk, and Starkey, get on your feet,” James barked. “Cut those riggings there, wrap it around the tentacle, and when I give the word pull the rigging on the other side with all of your might. Skylights, get your ax ready, and Jukes, position the cannon that way,” James said, pointing starboard.

The men just stood there looking puzzled. “What are you on about now, Headmaster?” asked Starkey, but Blackbeard seemed to see the merit in James’s plan immediately.

“You heard the man, get to your positions, and don’t question James’s orders again, or I’ll throw you overboard!” yelled Blackbeard, his face filled with rage.

“This better work, *Headmaster*!” said Blackbeard, giving James a wink.

Once Mullins, Turk, and Starkey managed to cut down the rigging, they wrapped the slack around the Kraken’s tentacle. It was all they could do to hold on to the ropes as the Kraken tipped the ship so severely water flooded the deck. James couldn’t see if Smee was still in the crow’s nest, and was afraid he had fallen overboard, but he had to keep his focus and hope for the best.

“Make sure it’s tight!” yelled James. He tethered himself to the mast with his belt so he didn’t fall as the ship rocked violently from one side to the other, taking on more and more water. James feared they would sink.

“Skylights, get that ax ready!” yelled Blackbeard, now holding on to the helm, as another wave crashed onto the deck. Skylights raised his ax and looked to James for the signal.

“Strike now!” said James, raising his hand. The man hacked away at one of the tentacles, as James called out to the other men, “Heave ho!” A massive wave of water washed over him, and he wiped the water away so he could see the men banding together, pulling on the rigging and raising the other tentacle into the air.

“Mullins! Fire now!” yelled James as the ship rocked drastically to one side, almost tipping over completely. Mullins was knocked overboard, and James was sure Smee must have been as well; he couldn’t see him in the crow’s nest that was now dangerously close to going into the water. All the other men were holding on to the rigging for dear life, so James quickly untethered himself from the mast, pulled a knife out of his boot, and plunged it into the deck of the ship. He used it to crawl inch by inch to the cannon, which was at the pinnacle of the ship, now tipped entirely on its side. James wasn’t sure he had the strength to climb the length of the ship at such a steep

angle, but he used all of his will, telling himself his story wasn't over, this wasn't how it was going to end. He hadn't yet found Never Land.

James finally made his way to the cannon, which was already loaded, but he couldn't light the fuse. "Blasted tinderbox is wet!" he yelled, trying to ignite it again and again. The ship was still on its side, and he could see the men were struggling to keep hold of the ropes that were tethered to the Kraken's tentacle. He heard the calls of the desperate men screaming his name from every direction. Then he saw Blackbeard at the other end of the ship, holding on for dear life as he fought against the giant tentacles that were wrapped around his leg and neck. James had never seen him look so scared.

"James!" he yelled, and threw something at James with his free hand.

"Captain, no!" screamed James. He would never forget the look of pure terror on Blackbeard's face as he was pulled underwater.

James glanced at the item, and, amid the chaos, realized it was a strange tinderbox of sorts. Without thinking twice, he quickly lit the fuse and positioned the cannon.

"Fire!" he yelled. The force blew the tentacle wrapped around the ship in half. It released its grip, and with that the ship rocketed in the other direction, rocking violently back and forth before righting itself in its proper position.

James rushed to where he had seen Blackbeard last, and without hesitation, dived off the ship. He opened his eyes in the murky water and saw the Kraken slithering away from the ship, dragging its damaged tentacle behind it. The water was clouded with so much blood that James couldn't see well, but could just make out the dark form of Blackbeard floating lifeless like a ghost, his coat billowing around him.

James swam through the blood-polluted ocean to Blackbeard, stretching out his hand as he got close enough to grab him. But just as he reached out to him, Blackbeard was snatched by a tentacle and dragged down, out of sight into the dark depths. James swam as fast as he could, following the trail of blood, but he knew he had made a mistake. He wouldn't be able to stay under for much longer, and he couldn't see past the blood.

This wasn't how his story was supposed to end. He could feel his lungs starting to seize, and he was losing strength. As fast as he could, he changed direction and swam toward the surface, but he had followed Blackbeard too far down—he would never reach the top. And in that moment he knew his

story was over before it could properly begin. With his heart full of regret, he let out his breath, and everything went black.

Chapter IV

The Crow's Nest

Smee watched in horror as James dived into the water after Blackbeard, and he held his breath waiting for him to return to the surface. Only moments before, the Kraken had tipped the ship on its side, making the crow's nest smack against the water. Smee was huddled inside, holding on to the mast for dear life, making himself as small as possible and hoping he and the ship weren't being pulled under. He felt like he was inside a cork bobbing in the water.

He saw James dive into the ocean just as the ship was righted. Smee had already feared he would eventually lose James to Blackbeard, but not in this way. He had seen how much James and Blackbeard respected each other, and was sure Blackbeard was about to make him his first mate. And though it made him happy for James, he wondered what would become of their relationship.

Logically he knew there was no way James could survive being underwater for so long, but he had an inexplicable feeling James was still alive. Nothing about James's life was typical as far as Smee was concerned,

and he seemed to have extraordinarily good luck. How else would you explain finding a position on the ship of Blackbeard, the very captain he idolized? James of course would never admit it, but he'd read everything he could about Blackbeard, and had made it his mission to join the pirate's crew. What strange stroke of luck lured James to that drinking hall that evening, the very place he would impress the dreaded Blackbeard himself?

Now impressing the man was another story. Smee knew luck had nothing to do with it; *that* was all James. His knowledge, skill, and unique personality had won Blackbeard over, just as he had won the day in the battle with the *Dreaded Queen*. None of them would be alive now if it weren't for James and his quick thinking. Smee had always felt James was an intelligent boy, and now he was a remarkable man, and pirate for that matter. Of course he wasn't like the other men on the crew, but then again James was never like anyone Smee had ever known. But as far as Smee was concerned, James had done well on Blackbeard's ship.

Sure, he made the occasional blunder when speaking to the men. James had a tendency to speak to people as if they didn't know what he was talking about, but there was a reason for that, one, for the most part, people weren't aware of. Smee never minded James's long-winded conversations, or that he seemed to know a lot about the subjects that inspired him, and could talk about them for hours. Smee looked at it as the education he missed out on going into service so young. To Smee it felt like he also went to a grand college, and he was happy he had listened to James all those years, especially on the subject of pirates, and as a result Smee now prided himself on his pirating knowledge, and he was even prouder of James.

Smee distracted himself with memories of their encounter with the *Dreaded Queen* as he swayed in the crow's nest. The *Dreaded Queen* was the largest ship Smee had ever seen, and on each side were rows of cannons, not to mention the goliath of a cannon on the starboard end. This was a great beast of a cannon with the mouth of a vicious-looking siren. James made it known he didn't think attacking the *Dreaded Queen* was a good idea, but Jukes felt they had the advantage of surprise, coming upon them at night, and the lure of treasure rumored to be hoarded on the *Dreaded Queen* was too tempting for Blackbeard to resist. To his credit, Rusty Jones had thought of a stealthy plan to anchor the ship some yards away from the *Dreaded Queen*, and quietly take the buoys over in the cover of night so their attack was a surprise, but James felt they should leave some of the men on the ship, fearing they would be defenseless should the other crew discover them.

“I’m sure this is a trap,” James had said. “I have a theory about the *Dreaded Queen*. I think they lure other ships with great stories of their treasure hoard only to plunder the ships and the crews that attack them.”

“If you’re afraid of joining our raiding party, then stay behind on the ship if you want, *Headmaster.* We don’t have time for your theories,” Rusty had said, sneering at James in disgust.

“James has a point, Rusty,” said the captain. “We need at least a few men on the ship so we can defend you and the other men should this be a trap after all.”

Smee knew James didn’t think attacking the *Dreaded Queen* was a good idea, but he was relieved Blackbeard agreed to keep some men aboard the *Silent Wraith*.

“It’s not a trap, Captain, I assure you, else we would have heard before now what the *Dreaded Queen*’s crew was up to,” said Rusty.

And so it was decided, they would go along with Rusty’s plan. The *Dreaded Queen* was a prize Blackbeard had been after for quite some time, and it seemed to Smee there was some sort of grievance, and this attack was about more than just treasure. But then again, Smee thought there was something more to Blackbeard than his reputation would suggest. He could see how he got his notoriety—he was an impressive captain, a fierce fighter who showed no mercy to his enemies, and a master navigator, but he was also a good man, and very intelligent. Smee was surprised how much he admired him, though once he realized how much Blackbeard and James had in common, it wasn’t a surprise after all.

Smee, along with James, Blackbeard, and a handful of men had watched as Rusty and the other crew members rowed over to the goliath of a ship, moving slowly and silently through the heavy mist that clung to the water’s surface. Once they were about halfway there, they saw flaming harpoons streaking through the night sky like shooting stars, igniting the water that surrounded the men in their boats. “It is a trap! They’ve laced the water with oil!” said Blackbeard as the *Dreaded Queen*’s lanterns seemed to light all at once. If Smee hadn’t been so frightened, he would have been impressed with how well planned their enemy’s attack was, and awed by the full glory of the magnificent ship shining against the black horizon. He saw countless men and women lining the deck ready for battle, their swords raised and their voices singing out. But even more frightening were the crew standing at every cannon holding torches, ready to light their fuses, their howls and peals of laughter ringing in Smee’s ears. Smee was more afraid

than he'd ever been in that moment, seeing his comrades encircled in flames, defenseless in their little boats, not to mention the multitude of cannons pointed at them and the *Silent Wraith*. He was sure he was going to die that day. But before Blackbeard could utter a command James spoke up.

"Raise the sails and advance on the *Dreaded Queen*!"

"Are you off your skull? They'll obliterate us!" said Jukes.

"Do as I say and hoist the damn sails, and when I say so, fire straight at those barrels next to the golden cannon!" And here is where James's uncanny luck came into play—the sky suddenly exploded with lightning that was so loud the men ducked, thinking the *Dreaded Queen* had fired its cannons. The wind stirred, thrashing the ship against the waves, and rain poured down in sheets.

"You don't know what you're talking about! We should be firing at their haul!" Jukes looked as if he didn't know what was more terrifying, the storm that hadn't fully reached them yet or the *Dreaded Queen*.

"Do you want your friends to die? Do as I say!"

Smee was very proud of James in that moment, and it seemed to Smee that James went up in Jukes's estimation, standing up to him in that way.

"You have your orders, Jukes, or do you want to go overboard and fend for yourself like your brothers?" said Blackbeard with an intimidating look that sent Jukes running.

"You heard the captain, hoist the sails!" yelled Jukes to the other men. They struggled to pull the riggings and raise the sails, which immediately caught the wind and moved them forward at a tremendous speed. If Smee believed in such things he would have thought it was all due to magic. How else did they have such high winds just as they needed them? He could almost hear the sounds of laughter on the wind, peals of it swirling all around them, and the ship was propelled toward the *Dreaded Queen* as it started to fire its cannons. All Smee could think of was how frightening it must have been for the men in the boats to be between two ships firing at each other. And then he heard James's voice echoing through the wind, rain, and thunder, and even louder than the cannons.

"Fire now! Aim at the barrels!" he said, pointing at the *Dreaded Queen*, and at the moment of impact there was an enormous explosion scattering the entire starboard side of the ship in every direction.

The rest was chaos as the men got back aboard the *Silent Wraith*, and the remaining crew of the *Dreaded Queen* scrambled onto boats, fleeing for their lives as their ship sank slowly into the sea.

When all the men were safely back aboard, they hoisted Jukes onto their shoulders as they carried him around the ship in celebration, praising him for saving their lives. Skylights got out a barrel of grog, and started passing out tankards as they celebrated. Smee watched James and Blackbeard standing back watching the others celebrate, and he knew the captain was praising James for his quick thinking. Smee only wished that it was James on the shoulders of those men, because it was he who'd won that day.

He was sure James would win this day, too. If only he would appear from under the water. Smee didn't want to lose hope, but the longer James and Blackbeard were under the sea the more Smee's heart sank. Then again, James did have uncanny good luck, and Smee was going to hold on to that, as he had held on for dear life in the crow's nest.

Chapter V

The Locker

When James woke he was still underwater, but didn't understand how he was breathing. He had dreamed what it would be like to dwell underwater like a sea creature, but never imagined it would be so beautiful and terrifying at the same time. All around him were sunken ships, rotting and in decay, that seemed to go in and out of focus through the murky green-and-blue water. He had never seen such remarkable ships, with their massive sails floating in the currents as if they were still traversing the sea. He wondered what had become of the sailors of these majestic ships; were they, too, at the bottom of the sea, their bones now under the seafloor? Or had some of them made their way back to tell their tales? The Kraken was lying motionless about twenty feet away, sprawled on the ocean floor, and had long since ceased to bleed from its severed tentacle. James swam to the titanic beast, and searched it hoping to find Blackbeard—he worried the captain was crushed under the massive creature. He started to panic, sure the great Blackbeard was dead, and still wondering how he was still alive and able to breathe, and hoped that somehow, like him, Blackbeard was still alive.

“Over here! I found your friend!” cried a high-pitched voice so piercing he thought his eardrums would burst. He couldn’t imagine what manner of creature could be making that noise. Then he saw her: she was a curious merging of fish and human, not a mermaid but something wholly different. Her face was somewhat human, but her eyes were large and bulbous like those of a fish, and she had gills on the sides of her strangely beautiful face. Her body, too, was a bizarre combination; she was shaped like a human woman, but her body was covered in luminescent green and golden scales, and her hands and feet were webbed. Her mouth was wide like that of an angler fish, and when she spoke she revealed many rows of sharp teeth. If she hadn’t been trying to help him he would have been afraid.

“Come quickly!” she said, making James’s ears hurt so badly he put his hands to them, sure they must be bleeding from the horrible pain the siren’s voice caused.

I’m sorry, she said without a sound, mouthing the words, and he could see she wasn’t trying to hurt him.

She must be a siren, he thought. He had always imagined them to look like mermaids. The siren was frantically trying to rouse Blackbeard, shaking him when James finally reached them. Blackbeard was lying motionless on the ocean floor, lifeless and ghastly pale. Beside Smee, this was the closest friend he had, and he wasn’t ready to lose him.

“Is he dead?” he asked, but Blackbeard’s pallor answered his question: he had deep bruises around his neck from the leviathan’s tentacle, his skin was a bluish white, and his eyes were protruding from their sockets.

The siren whipped her head around and scowled at something James could not see. *He’s coming!* she mouthed silently, looking panicked and inching farther away from them. *We have to go now.*

“Who is coming? I can’t leave my captain here,” said James as the siren swam quickly away. “Don’t leave, I need help getting his body back to the ship!” But the siren was well out of sight. James tried to drag Blackbeard’s body, but it was too heavy; there was no way he would be able to swim him up to the surface. “Don’t worry, sir, I’ll figure something out, I won’t leave you! This is not our fate.”

“But this is your fate, James,” said an ominous voice, slicing through the water like a shock wave. “This is where the dead come so they may be led to their final rest.”

James looked around startled, wondering where the voice was coming from, but saw no one there. “I won’t let you take him!” said James,

frantically looking around to see whom he was talking to.

"You have no choice, and I shall take you both," said the voice, echoing through their under-water grave.

"But I can't be dead." *Can I?* "This isn't the end of my tale." James wondered if he was dreaming. None of this seemed real.

"Well, you know what they say about dead men," said the voice, now laughing.

"Who are you? Show yourself!" said James, squinting, trying to see through the murky water. A massive ship materialized out of the darkness in front of him. The ship looked both alive and dead, like the skeletal remains of a once-beautiful ship, now twisted and made grotesque by decay. The stern looked like a great gaping mouth ready to devour anything in its path, and its deck was populated by hundreds of seafaring men and women who had lost their lives to the perils of the sea. The *Flying Dutchman*! James was sure he must be dreaming; he had read stories like this but never believed they were real. Standing at its helm was a spectral captain with a grave smile on his face that sent a chill through James's core. The ship's massive sails floated like ghosts in the water behind him.

James had read about this deity of death, charged with the duty of ushering lost souls to their resting place, but thought it was all just legend and myth.

"You're Duffer Jones." James could hardly believe this was happening. He didn't know if he was trapped in a horrible nightmare, truly dead, or both. He wondered if he was being punished for abandoning his family and his duty to them. He couldn't believe this was how his story was going to end, and he made a promise to himself he would make it his mission to make sure his mother was taken care of if he made it out of this alive.

"I am known by many names, James. Call me what you like, Duffer, Davy, Jonah, the Sailor's Angel of Death, any of them will do. I am bound by the great goddess Calypso to ferry all those who have died at sea into the next world. Will you go peacefully, or will you make it more interesting and put up a fight?" said the ghostly pirate.

"We will put up a fight," said Blackbeard, surprising James. His mentor stood at his side, strong as ever.

"Captain! You're alive."

"You could say that," said Blackbeard, winking at James. "Do you have that tinderbox I tossed you?" asked Blackbeard under his breath, nudging

James but never taking his eyes off the ghostly deity. James took it from his pocket and handed it to him slyly.

“Stand your ground, James. Do not falter, stay strong, do not move from this spot, and trust me, we will persevere,” said Blackbeard before he let out a harrowing howl so loud it seemed to awaken the very ocean. The water swirled around them in a great force, causing the other ships to rise from the seafloor and twist in the cyclones. The ghostly pirate laughed.

“I see you have great goddesses at your disposal as well, Blackbeard. Shall we see whose are stronger?” And without warning the dead captain’s crew emerged from the bowels of his ship, and they charged forward.

“Give us your worst, you devils!” Blackbeard bellowed as the swarm of pirate ghosts were bearing down on them, their faces twisted with rage and decay. James wanted to run, but he remembered Blackbeard’s words and stood his ground, and he thought if he was going to die that day, at least he would do it bravely and at the side of a great man. He would have a good death, and perhaps one day his and Blackbeard’s story would be told in the great sagas, and sailors would sing songs of their adventures. And just as James was about to close his eyes and brace himself for death, a bright light emerged from the gold tinderbox in Blackbeard’s hand. It erupted like an exploding star, its light sending everything around them careening backward, and Blackbeard and James upward at frightening velocity. James held on to Blackbeard as they were propelled through the water, but lost him when they rocketed into the air, only to smack down again on the water’s surface. James looked around and saw Blackbeard a few feet away from him, passed out and sinking back into the ocean.

James swam over to Blackbeard and used all his strength to pull him back up to the surface. The dread pirate was so heavy, his weight nearly dragged James back down with him.

Once on the surface James found a section of the ship that had been dislodged in the battle with the Kraken, and quickly grabbed hold of it. He pulled a silver whistle from his pocket and blew it until the men looked overboard. Skylights popped his head over the side and spied them.

“Ahoy! We thought we lost you!” said Skylights, then he called to the other men for help.

James could see Smee looking down at him from the crow’s nest, smiling. “Master James! Master James, you’re alive!”

“Throw down the ladder!” yelled James as he struggled to pull Blackbeard to the ship. “Quickly!” It took all his might to keep the captain

from going under again; he was barely conscious, and his deadweight was growing heavier by the moment, and James was afraid he was going to lose him.

"Sir, please!" James pleaded. "Hold on a little longer." Just then the rope ladder came tumbling down the side of the ship. James quickly undid his belt, looped it around Blackbeard's, and then refastened it around his own waist again. This way he wouldn't lose Blackbeard, but this also meant if Blackbeard went under again, so would James.

"Sir, please grab on to me," James begged. But Blackbeard was either passed out or dead. James wasn't going to lose him, not after everything they had been through. "Sir! Wake up," he said, slapping his captain with a massive blow, bringing him around. "I'm sorry, sir. Hold on to me," James said, but he did not know if Blackbeard could hear him. The captain looked horribly pale, and James wasn't sure Blackbeard would survive this.

"Skylights, get all the men to pull us up! I can't drag him up myself," James said, holding on to the rope ladder, not sure the men would be able to hoist them up, either. Blackbeard was much heavier than James, and now James was worried he had made a mistake tethering them together.

"Sir, please don't let go, you'll take me down with you," he said as the crew pulled on the rope ladder with all their might, inch by inch, until they finally pulled Blackbeard and James up, slamming them violently back on deck. James undid his belt, got up, and pounded Blackbeard's sternum, forcing the water from his lungs like a geyser. Blackbeard was gasping for breath, sputtering and spewing out water, but he didn't seem able to breathe. James kept pounding, hoping he would be able to force out all the water, when suddenly he felt someone violently pull him backward and away from Blackbeard.

"What are you doing to him?" yelled Jukes, holding a knife against James's throat. James sat there frozen in fear and dazed by everything that had happened.

"He was saving my life, you old fool of a seadog!" said Blackbeard, sitting up and catching his breath. "Put that knife away and assess the damage of my ship!" said Blackbeard. Then, looking at James, he asked, "Is everyone accounted for, James?"

James got back on his feet, his legs shaking, and took a look around, feeling dazed and out of breath. "Men, sound off!" he bellowed. Everyone but Mullins and Smee called out their names.

“Smee, are you all right?” asked James, looking up at the crow’s nest, which seemed like it could collapse at any moment. “Smee, my dear fellow, get down here at once!”

“Aye, sir!” said Smee, appearing as though he fared much better than anyone else in their company, but afraid to climb down the damaged pole.

“Skylights, how’s our ship?” James felt dizzy, unsteady on his feet, and his nerves were frayed—plus, he had somehow lost track of Blackbeard. “Someone help Smee out of that crow’s nest! And where’s the bloody captain?”

“The captain is in his quarters, sir. He didn’t look well,” yelled Mullins as he lent a hand to Wibbles, who was helping Smee onto the deck, finally free of the crow’s nest.

“Smee, my good man! I am mightily happy to see you safe,” said James, taking the man into his arms and hugging him tightly. “I don’t know what I would do if I lost you. What were you doing in the crow’s nest anyway?”

“It’s the best place to keep an eye on you, sir. But I see now, you don’t need my protection. I have never seen such bravery,” said Smee, swelling with pride. “We’d better check on the captain, sir.”

James and Smee found Blackbeard gathering up some scattered items that had fallen to the floor and putting them back into a wooden chest, the one James had seen earlier with the carving of an eye.

“Sir?”

Blackbeard looked up from the chest briefly; James could see deep bruises around his neck where the Kraken’s tentacles had pulled him under, and he looked no better than he did when James found him on the ocean floor.

“What’s the report, James?”

“Everyone is accounted for, sir,” James said, blinking, still feeling dazed by everything that had happened.

“And what says Skylights? How’s my ship?”

“We’ll be lucky if we can get her to the Floating Boneyard, sir,” said Skylights, coming into the room at that moment and standing beside Smee.

“Is it as bad as all that?” asked Blackbeard, looking at Skylights.

“I’m afraid so, sir. It’s time to retire the *Silent Wraith*.” Skylights bowed his head.

“So be it, then,” said Blackbeard, looking around the cabin as a man might look at a loved one he knew he was bound to lose. “Are you all right,

Smee? It seems you were the safest among us up there in the crow's nest—who would have imagined?" asked Blackbeard.

"Are you sure you're well, Smee? Should we have Turk take a look at you?" asked James, fussing over his dear friend.

"I'm quite well, sir, don't worry about me. And may I say you were amazing today, just brilliant. The way you dived into the water after our captain! I have never seen such bravery. You saved the day!" said Smee, looking at James with pride. Then he cleared his throat. "Of course, you were brilliant too, sir. You both won the day," Smee said, looking embarrassed and afraid he had offended Blackbeard.

"No, you're right, Mr. Smee. James did win the day. If it weren't for his bravery we would have all taken our last voyage on the *Flying Dutchman*." Blackbeard clapped his arm around James, bringing him in for a hug. "Thank you, James. I owe you my life. I think you know I was going to ask you to be my first mate when I invited you to dine with me this evening, but I think I have something you'll like even more," said Blackbeard with a smile. "Now if the rest of you will excuse me, I would like to talk with my first mate alone."

Smee and Skylights left the room, but James spoke before Blackbeard could share what was on his mind. "Excuse me, sir, but you actually saved my life down there with the *Flying Dutchman*. I can't take the credit."

Blackbeard clasped James's shoulder and then patted him on the back. "What makes you think we made it out alive?" he said, laughing.

James always felt Blackbeard had a strange sense of humor, but he couldn't help but wonder if he was being serious. Everything that had happened had seemed impossible, and dreamlike. He'd wondered several times while he was underwater if he was living or dead. "If you hadn't been brave enough to dive in after me we wouldn't have had that enchanted tinderbox, and every single one of us would have been taken to the other side. All I did was use it." Blackbeard picked up the wooden box with the carving of the eye and handed it to James.

"This is yours now, my son. And I shall tell you all about it on our way to the Floating Boneyard!"

Chapter VI

The Floating Boneyard

In every corner of the many worlds are places like the Floating Boneyard, where ships go to die, or await to be reborn. As the *Silent Wraith* entered the watery grave, James was astounded by Blackbeard's navigational skill traversing such tight spaces.

The entrance was a marvel. It was flanked by two enormous statues of Poseidon that stretched taller than the highest mountain, and once through the cyclopean gates they glided past ships in all manner of disrepair. James had never seen such ships, gilded in gold, some with sirens as their figurehead, and others adorned with ornately carved Krakens and skeletons, and flying colorful flags. The Viking ships were the most spectacular, with their stately mythical figureheads of sea serpents with great horns, and depictions of their gods and runes carved into their expertly crafted hulls. He had always imagined Viking ships to be much larger, but their smaller size did not diminish their majesty and wonder. Some were in pristine condition, looking as if they were waiting for a captain to claim them, while others looked as though only a miracle kept them afloat.

The *Silent Wraith* effortlessly cut through the thick mist that hovered on the water's surface as it glided past the beauty and decay. James thought there was a particular loveliness to things that were forgotten and neglected, and longed to learn the stories of all the ships in the boneyard so that he could chronicle them. As he took in the awesome sight, James noticed that where the mist was thinnest he could see lights shining below in the watery depths. The little flickering lights seemed to beckon him, and he wondered if that was where he would learn the tales of these glorious vessels.

"Don't look at the lights too long, James, else they shall lure you in," said Blackbeard, keeping his gaze forward. James could see Blackbeard was searching for a particular ship.

"What are they, the lights?" asked James, feeling a strange and powerful desire to dive into the water and see for himself.

"Candles, lit by the souls of captains who refuse to leave their ships, and be ushered to the world beyond by the *Flying Dutchman*," said Blackbeard. It sent a shiver through James that made him feel colder than he'd ever been. James was mesmerized by the beauty and terror of this place, looking down at all the candlelights glittering in the water.

"But where are the captains?" he asked.

"Holding their candles," said Blackbeard.

James imagined what it must be like for the poor dead souls forever trapped in this place, and wondered if he would find himself there one day.

"What a horrible thought," said James, trying to shake off the chill that overtook him.

"Don't fret, young sir. If the ship is reclaimed by another captain, the light goes out and the spirit is set free. Some of the spirits eventually choose to move beyond the veil, while others inhabit their ships, like this one. That is why I call her the *Silent Wraith*. She is imbued with the spirits of her previous captains. I will be sad to be parted from her," said Blackbeard.

James had always felt there was something otherworldly about Blackbeard's ship, and now he knew why.

As James looked around at the literal sea of ships that stretched before him, seemingly endless in its splendor and corrosion, his eyes fixed on a magnificent tall ship, fully rigged with massive sails. It seemed almost magical to James, all red and gold, with its Jolly Roger flag blowing proudly in the wind. It was by no means the most stately one in the boneyard, but there was something about the ship that drew James to it. He saw himself on it, and knew somehow it was the next step in his journey to find Never Land.

“Aye, the *Jolly Roger*, she is a beauty, isn’t she?” said Blackbeard, seeing James cast his eye on the beautiful ship. “Cursed she was, by three witches, as I sailed her from their shores with some of their treasures. They said the only way to break the curse was to give her away freely to someone who saved my life, and that is you, James. She is yours.” Then he added, “And so is my crew.”

James thought he couldn’t possibly be hearing Blackbeard correctly. There was no way he could be giving him this ship *and* his crew.

“But sir, we’ve only started our journey together, I couldn’t let you give me your ship.”

“You’ll make a fine captain, James. My time has finally come to an end. I’m tired of running from my fate. You reminded me of that when we were talking earlier.” Blackbeard was now looking down at the lights flickering under the water.

“Do you think that’s what I’m doing, sir? Running from my fate?” asked James, thinking of his life back home, and the promise he made to himself when he thought he was going to die. Though he could hardly call what he’d had back home in London a life. If he were there now his mother would be thrusting every eligible young lady in front of him until he agreed to marry one of them, and what would his life be like once married? Suffocating in drawing rooms, longing to be in Never Land. Was that his fate? He knew plenty of men who’d escaped their arranged marriages and took up bad habits, spending all their time at their club, arrested in their development, seeming to never grow up, and he wondered if they, too, had fallen out of their prams and gotten a taste for Never Land. James didn’t want to spend his life that way. He would make sure his mother was well taken care of, but he would not forfeit his dreams. Even if he never found Never Land, at least on the open sea, he felt like he could breathe.

“You’re running toward your fate, a better life, and you have it all before you. You get to choose the sort of man you want to be. It’s your choice, James, no one else’s,” said Blackbeard, taking something golden from the wooden chest adorned with a menacing eye that seemed to be looking into James’s soul.

“I want you to have these, James. I found them in a distant magical land called the Many Kingdoms,” the captain said, handing James a pair of gold boot buckles and a rolled piece of parchment. “And that, my young friend, is a map to the Many Kingdoms. I know it’s not your beloved Never Land, but it is a wondrous place full of magic. I need you to seek out the three most

powerful witches in those lands and tell them I have given you my ship so they may release me from their curse. And I am sure they can show you the way to Never Land. But be careful, James, there is always a price with the Odd Sisters."

"The Odd Sisters? Are these the witches who cursed you and your ship?"

"The very ones. But you're smarter than I was at your age, my boy. You won't fall into one of their sticky traps. Simply do the favor they require of you for the information you seek, nothing more or less, and whatever you do don't lie, try to deceive them, or take their treasures. They always know. That was my mistake."

"And these boot buckles, were they, too, a gift from the witches?" asked James.

"A gift of sorts," said Blackbeard, laughing. "Let's just say I wouldn't wear them when you pay them a visit. But you needn't worry about the curse on the ship; I have fulfilled my end by giving it to someone who saved my life. The witches are treacherous, but they do keep their word, for good or for ill."

James held the boot buckles in his hand and felt a wave of fear pass through him, a tingling sensation that ran through his entire body. He dropped the buckles, and they clattered to the floor. He looked down at them, hesitating before picking them up.

"The buckles aren't cursed, my boy!" said Blackbeard.

"How do you know they are not cursed?" said James.

"The Odd Sisters love to brag about their misdeeds. I imagine if they were cursed they would have delighted in telling me so," said Blackbeard.

"And you think these women will help me find Never Land?" James asked.

"I do, my boy, else I wouldn't charge you with this mission, even if it meant I continued to live with this curse they have set upon my soul."

"But I thought you said the curse was broken," asked James, wondering again if this was all a dream.

"The curse on the ship is broken, James, but not the curse on my soul. In order to break that I need you to visit the Odd Sisters and let them know you have taken possession of my ship."

There were so many things James wanted to say, so many questions he wanted to ask, but he could see Blackbeard was exhausted; he still looked terribly injured from their ordeal with the Kraken and the harrowing events

with the *Flying Dutchman*'s captain. He could see all Blackbeard wanted was to rest. This man had given him everything, and now he was sending him to a place where he might achieve his dream; the least he could do was deliver a message to the Odd Sisters.

"How will I know these Odd Sisters when I get to the Many Kingdoms?"

"These are no ordinary witches, James. You will know them when you see them. It has been many years since I've visited these witches, but if all their stories are to be believed they won't have changed. Their beauty is so ill-proportioned they are unnatural, yet striking, and dangerously compelling, and each of them looks like the other. And don't worry about finding them—they will seek you out the moment you hit the Morningstar shores."

"I feel a strange foreboding, sir, when I touch these boot buckles," said James, picking them up and putting them in his inside breast pocket. "They make me feel afraid."

"They are worthy of a captain, James. You fear what they symbolize. But you are the bravest man I have ever met. Any man in your position would be afraid. You're about to captain your own ship, and take a voyage to a land filled with witches, fairies, and all manner of creatures. The journey will bring you closer to your goal, and that is always frightening, my son, because realizing one's dreams can be a terrifying venture, for fear they don't meet one's expectations." Blackbeard put his hand on James's shoulder.

James decided Blackbeard was right. He was afraid of finally realizing his dream, which he had wanted for so long. "Are you sure I'm ready, sir? I'd so like to serve alongside you for a while longer. Won't you come with me to the Many Kingdoms?" he asked, knowing he was going to miss Blackbeard.

"Alas, I am barred from ever returning. I know you are ready, James. *You* were the captain today. You saved me and these men, and now they will do anything for you. They will follow you anywhere you venture, even Never Land. Please, my boy, take this gift I am giving you in gratitude for saving my life and the life of my crew. I would take this journey with you if I could, my friend, but you are taking paths I cannot follow. The only other thing I ask for in return is to get yourself a proper pirate's name," he said, chuckling.

"Where will you go?" asked James.

“I will be going down with the other captains and lighting a candle of my own.”

Chapter VII

Pirates in the Many Kingdoms

After several months or more of travel, the *Jolly Roger* finally arrived in the Many Kingdoms. As they sailed past the Lighthouse of the Gods and made their way to Morningstar Harbor, James gasped at its beauty. Nothing could have prepared him for the massive stone lighthouse that housed the magnificent jewel in its tower, or the cyclopean castle built in the same fashion that shone behind it in the sunlight like a magic star. Skylights had shared many stories with James about the Many Kingdoms as they made their journey there, making James all the more eager to get there and see this magical place for himself.

All around the castle was a field of golden flowers that seemed to emanate a light of their own, making the castle look even more brilliant. Skylights said these flowers weren't always in Morningstar Kingdom; when Blackbeard had visited the Many Kingdoms years before they had only seen them in a place called the Dead Woods, but that was long before the Odd Sisters claimed it as their home. In all of his reading James had never read about the Many Kingdoms, so he was happy that Skylights shared what

Blackbeard had told him over their years pirating together. If Morningstar was an example of the kingdoms he would come across in this land, he was sure it would make a worthy adventure.

"Are you sure about this, Master James?" asked Smee. "The way Skylights tells it, these witches sound like foul creatures. Not the sort one should get mixed up with." Smee seemed in James's estimation much more at home on a pirate ship than he had been a year ago. He seemed to command some respect from the crew, especially since James had become captain, and by all accounts took on the role of James's first mate without James officially giving him the title, but that was just fine with James. Smee was allowed to take these liberties; he had taken care of James since he was a boy—who better to be his right-hand man? And who better to share his lifelong dream?

"Don't worry, Smee, I'll be fine. Though I am counting on you to keep an eye on the crew. I don't want them leaving the ship and wandering the Many Kingdoms."

"None of them dare leave the ship, sir. They're all too frightened. Skylights has been filling their heads with terrible stories about these lands," said Smee, squinting his eyes to see if he could make out anyone on the turrets of Morningstar Castle.

"Skylights says the kingdom of Morningstar is peaceful, Smee. There is no need to fear this place," said James.

"But what of the Tree Lords, sir? Or the Cyclopean Giants? There is an immortal queen here rumored to rule these beasts." Smee looked around nervously, trying to catch a glimpse of her golden hair and fair face.

"Skylights told me of Queen Tulip and King Popinjay. They sound like adventurous sorts, who are far too busy to deal with the likes of us. By Skylights's account, Morningstar has been welcoming sailors for more years than history recollects. I assure you we are in no danger here," said James.

The fact was this place intrigued James; he was fascinated by all the stories Skylights had told him, and if he wasn't Hades-bent on getting to Never Land this would be just the sort of place he'd like to explore and learn more about. As it was, Skylights had given him quite the history on their long journey there. By all accounts Queen Tulip seemed like an amazing woman, someone James would be honored to meet. If the stories Blackbeard shared with Skylights were true, James could think of no other monarch, in his land or any other, that surpassed her bravery and perseverance. James was astounded that this place had managed to capture his imagination almost

as vividly as Never Land had. An immortal queen who was once betrothed to an evil man who was cursed to become a beast, who treated her so poorly she threw herself off the cliffs only to be saved by a sea witch. James had heard no tale as harrowing or inspiring as hers, the way she not only mended her broken heart but became the woman she was always meant to be: strong, brave, and protecting these lands from evil with the help of giant trees who could walk and talk. This was the stuff of legends. This was a woman worthy of great respect. He wished he could meet her, but his desire to reach Never Land was even more compelling than Queen Tulip's saga.

"At the moment my only desire and obstacle is finding these witches. Blackbeard said they would sense my coming here, but so far I have seen no sign of them," said James as a delicate black crow circled and cawed overhead.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," said Skylights, joining Smee and James, and pointing at the crow. "That, sir, is one of their minions. Her name is Opal, and she is a tricky little devil. She once belonged to the Dark Fairy who ravaged these lands with fire and heartbreak. Some say the Dark Fairy refused to pass into the mist when she died, and can come back in her dragon form to set the lands ablaze again and again to punish those who took her daughter from her." This made Smee even more nervous. Smee's eyes were now searching the sky for dragons.

James shook his head. "Did Blackbeard tell you this, Skylights? Dragons indeed!" said James, scoffing.

"Indeed he did, sir. All these stories are in his Book of Fairy Tales. It's in the chest he gave you before we departed the Floating Boneyard, the one with the eye."

"He didn't tell me what was in the chest," James said, remembering when Blackbeard had handed it over to him before they made their way to the Floating Boneyard:

"Don't open this chest, James, not until you are well away from these lands, and safely in Never Land. And no matter how tempted, do not open it while you are in the Many Kingdoms. Trust me, James. The Odd Sisters would do anything to get their hands on what's inside this chest. But I have long paid the price for taking these treasures, and they are my most prized possessions. Now they belong to you."

"Are you sure you want to give them to me, sir?"

"I won't need them where I'm going, James. Now go! Find the life you always wanted to live."

James hadn’t even thought about opening the chest. His friend had told him not to. But he liked knowing he had something the Odd Sisters wanted if it came to it.

Just then Opal swooped down, landing besides James. She stretched out her little leg, offering it to him so he could remove the scroll attached. She gave a soft caw, and bowed her head as she took off, her wings glistening in the sunlight, reflecting blue and purple highlights in her black feathers.

“It’s from the Odd Sisters,” said James, reading the scroll. “It looks as if I am invited to tea with them in the Dead Woods this evening. They’ve instructed me to pick up a cake on my way,” he said, laughing. “How powerful can these witches be if they can’t conjure themselves their own cake?” Skylights cringed at the sound of their name. It was clear these Odd Sisters evoked fear in almost everyone, even Blackbeard, so perhaps James was being a bit too cavalier, but he couldn’t help it.

“Shhh! They’re probably listening, sir! Don’t speak ill of the Dreaded Three; they have eyes and ears everywhere.” Skylights looked around as if he expected to see them lurking behind every corner.

“Don’t be ridiculous, man!” James said. “Smee, find me something suitable to wear. I want to look the gentleman for these Strange Sisters.”

“They’re called the Odd Sisters, sir. And what pray tell is a suitable outfit for an afternoon tea with witches?” asked Smee.

“My finest suit of course, with the black morning coat, and my top hat,” James said, thinking of what a fine figure he will cut for the ladies. “Yes, Smee, I think that will do nicely.” As much as he loved his pirate garb, he quite liked the idea of changing things up, and putting on a good show for these witches of the Dead Woods.

“If you say so, sir,” said Smee, rolling his eyes.

“If it’s good enough for tea with the queen, it’s good enough for the Weird Sisters,” said James.

“They’re called the Odd Sisters, sir!” said Smee, making James laugh. Smee tottered off to get his suit ready.

“Now, where to find a cake?” said James, looking at the map Blackbeard had given him, and wondering what the rest of this day would bring.

Chapter VIII

The Odd Sisters' Cake

It had been a long journey by horse-drawn carriage from Morningstar Kingdom to the Dead Woods, which the Odd Sisters called home, but as luck would have it James found a small bakery along the way, with the silliest of names. Tiddlebottom's and Butterpants's Bakery sat on the outskirts of a lovely little kingdom, surrounded by golden flowers that glowed in the dusky twilight. The names *Tiddlebottom* and *Butterpants* rang a bell in his memory, but he couldn't then recall why; he was exhausted from his journey by sea, and now by carriage, and he was feeling a bit punchy, and all he could do was laugh at the names and the series of events that had befallen him since he'd dived into the ocean after his friend.

In the near distance, he spied a lonely and crumbling tower that grew out of the forest. As they passed through the kingdom, he remembered the stories Skylights had told him, that it used to be home—or prison, really—to the woman who was now queen of this hamlet when she was a young girl. Skylights told him the strangest stories about the many kings and queens of the various kingdoms in this land. This one, it seems, had magical hair, and

she was held captive in that tower by a witch who wished to use the young girl's hair to bring her sisters back to life. Sisters by the name of Primrose and Hazel. The way Skylights had described the events it was all rather macabre, the idea of wrapping a little girl's hair around the dead bodies of her sisters, in hopes of raising them from the dead. As James traveled the length of the Many Kingdoms, the stories Skylights told him rang in his ears —evil curses, haunted mirrors, beauties who fell in love with beasts, trees that could walk and talk, and now, witches who dealt in necromancy, and not just witches but generations of them who ruled over the very place he was about to visit. But in that moment it was his task to procure for his hosts a cake, and it seemed the bakery with the laughable name was closed, and he didn't know what he would do.

James could see through the window that this was no ordinary bakery; it had the most divine cakes he had ever seen, cases and cases of them in all manner of design and flavors. He hardly knew what he would choose. *What sort of cake do identical witch sisters like?* But it seemed he would be showing up empty-handed.

"Bloody hell, of course it's closed, it's almost evening. Damnable bakers and their hours," said James. Then he saw a young woman inside the shop puttering around, no doubt starting on her baking for the next day, though he could hardly understand why when it looked as though she had already created so many beautiful cakes, and he wondered if she wasn't a poor soul from one of these fairy tales, cursed to continue baking or some other such nonsense.

"Excuse me, good woman!" said James, tapping on the window. "Please, can't I just buy one of your delicious-looking cakes? I will pay you handsomely." James rapped on the window harder and harder. Within moments the jolly-looking woman made her way to the door and unlocked it.

"May I help you?" she asked, eyeing him suspiciously. "You're not from around here are you, sir?" James could see she was looking at his clothing and seemed to be taking measure of him, and decided she didn't know what to make of him.

"No, good woman, I've just recently arrived in your magical kingdom. I'm sorry to disturb you. Are you Mrs. Tiddlebottom? I'm looking to buy a cake, perhaps the almond cake there in the window? I'm on my way to visit the Queer Sisters, and I don't want to show up without the cake they requested." James shoved coins into Mrs. Tiddlebottom's hands, hoping it

would persuade her, but she hardly noticed; she just looked at him as if she had seen a ghost.

“Do you mean the Odd Sisters?” Mrs. Tiddlebottom gave James the strangest look. He realized his choice of clothing was probably a misstep. His pirate gear would have probably gone over much better, seeing the way people dressed in these lands. It seemed to James they didn’t dress much differently than they had in his own lands, but during more antiquated times, so it was no wonder this woman was looking at him strangely; she had never seen clothing such as this.

“Yes, I suppose I do mean the Odd Sisters,” said James, chuckling. At this point he took delight in saying their names wrong. Something about it made him feel less nervous about meeting them.

“Are you sure it was the Odd Sisters who made this request? May I ask the manner in which you received it?” she asked, squinting at James in a way that told him she didn’t believe him.

“I’m quite sure, Mrs. Tiddlebottom. And if you really must know, they sent the message with a crow.” This made Mrs. Tiddlebottom’s eyes grow large.

“Was she a delicate creature, with black feathers that shined blue and purple in the light? Did she seem otherworldly to you?” Mrs. Tiddlebottom seemed as if she was afraid of his answer.

“I’d say so,” he said. “Why do you ask? Is there something I should know about the Odd Sisters and their creature?”

Mrs. Tiddlebottom smiled.

“There are a great many things you need to know about the Odd Sisters and their minions; however we don’t have time to discuss them now. Might I suggest our largest six-layer cake, sir? The sisters’ love of cakes is legendary. Though I didn’t know they were now in the position to order them, let alone eat them.” James had the feeling this woman had a long history with the Odd Sisters, and there was some aspect about them requesting a cake that bothered her deeply. And then he realized why her name seemed so familiar to him when he first saw it on the bakery window. This young woman must have been the granddaughter of Mrs. Tiddlebottom, the renowned baker who was once nanny to the queen in this kingdom. The very woman who was terrorized by the Old Witch—with the help of the Odd Sisters—who was desperately trying to bring her sisters, Primrose and Hazel, back to life with the princess’s magical hair, the poor girl they had locked away in a tower, the princess who had grown up to be queen of these lands.

“I don’t wish to be impertinent, dear woman, but may I ask if you’re related to the queen’s nanny? You share the same name, and it doesn’t seem like a common one to me.”

Mrs. Tiddlebottom gave him a curious look. “So you’ve been reading the Book of Fairy Tales? I imagine the ladies of the Dead Woods are very keen to have it back. I suppose that is why you are here. And to answer your question, I am the very same Mrs. Tiddlebottom you recall from that terrifying and tangled story. But that is all I will say on the subject with a stranger. To be sure I will be making a visit to the ladies of the Dead Woods to see how it is that the Odd Sisters are in a position to order cakes, let alone eat them.”

James found this woman very puzzling. She was clearly much younger than the woman in the story Skylights had told him. He wondered if everyone in the Many Kingdoms was so. “You seem much too young to be the same woman,” he said, not able to help himself.

“So I am, but there are many things about this place you don’t yet understand. Magic so old it would take a lifetime to discover. I only know because I have lived several lifetimes thanks to the magic of these flowers,” she said, glancing at the golden flowers that seemed to cover the entirety of the landscape in the Many Kingdoms. “Now, how about that six-layer cake we discussed? Shall I make it ready for you?” she asked, her tone making it very clear she didn’t wish to answer any more of his questions.

“Six layers it is, then!” he said, shaking his head. “Tell me, are these Freaky Sisters as terrible as everyone says?” He found himself lowering his voice for fear of upsetting her with more questions.

“Oh, they are more terrible than you could possibly imagine. But perhaps the cake will distract them. I’ll have my husband, Mr. Butterpants, bring it out to the carriage for you, sir. Don’t you worry, they will love your gift,” said Mrs. Tiddlebottom, rushing off to the kitchen in a panic. James narrowed his eyes as he watched the nervous woman rush off, and wondered if he wasn’t taking this part of his adventure seriously enough.

James waited for more than an hour for the cake to be brought out, and when it was, he was surprised to see it was far larger than six layers, and adorned with a menagerie of marzipan animals. James had never seen such a cake, not even in the halls of royalty back in London. It was so massive they had to bring it out on its own horse-drawn cart.

“This is my husband, Mr. Butterpants. He will follow along behind your carriage, sir, and help with the delivery of the cake, but he won’t go

into the Dead Woods, not for anything. It's a dead place, sir, ruled by necromantic witches. Horrible things have happened there," said Mrs. Tiddlebottom.

James hardly knew what to say. He didn't dare ask why this husband and wife didn't share a last name, but then he supposed they did things differently in this land. "While this is truly the most magnificent cake I have ever beheld, don't you think it's a bit much?"

Mr. Butterpants and Mrs. Tiddlebottom shook their heads.

"No, sir, the sisters love their cake, and it's best to make them happy," said Mr. Butterpants. There was an unmistakable look of nervousness on both of their faces, and James had the sinking feeling he had thrown their day into chaos by the mere mention of the Odd Sisters. He wondered what he was getting himself into. It was all pretty laughable, the idea of bringing such a large cake, but he decided to just go along with it. If these witches loved cake so much, then why not bring the biggest, and made by the most renowned bakers in the Many Kingdoms? Surely that would impress them, and make them more agreeable to helping him find Never Land.

"Thank you for everything, this is truly a splendid cake. But please, let me give you something more. What I paid you doesn't even cover the costs of ingredients," James said, pulling out more gold coins from his pocket.

"No, it's our pleasure, sir," said Mr. Butterpants, but James insisted, putting the coins into his hand.

"Thank you, Mr. Butterpants and Mrs. Tiddlebottom, wish me luck," James said as he got into his carriage, waving as it pulled away, wondering what the rest of the day would bring.

Chapter IX

The Ladies of the Dead Woods

The Dead Woods was surrounded by a towering, dense thicket of deep-red rosebushes. It was so tall all James could see was the solarium at the highest point of the mansion, shining as if in sunlight even though it was now dark. He had heard the thicket was dead, dried, and thorny, but the roses were blooming with life, and the deepest, most beautiful shade of red he had ever beheld. It looked nothing like the dead place Skylights had described, and he didn't understand why it was called the Dead Woods. "This can't be right; there is no entrance," said James.

"We're in the right place, sir," said the driver, looking frightened. His eyes darted around as if he expected something sinister to pop out of the bushes.

James had to wonder if he had made a mistake coming to this place. The hilarity of the cake aside, the tales he'd heard about these witches were starting to unnerve him. Just when he started to assure himself he was probably overreacting, a red swirling vortex appeared in the thicket right

before them, creating an opening, and standing there in the center of swirling red flames was the most luminescent woman James had ever seen.

Her hair was long and light golden, and it shone with a light that seemed to be coming from within. She wore a long silver dress, and on her collarbone rested a silver pendant depicting the three phases of the moon. She looked as if she wasn't of this world, and then he remembered he was no longer in his own world, so to call this woman otherworldly was simply stating a fact—and perhaps wasn't as remarkable as it seemed in that moment. Though James had a feeling even by this world's standards this woman would be remarkable.

"Hello, James, I am Circe, the queen of this land. You are most welcome here," she said, instantly putting him at ease as she motioned to have him enter through the magical vortex.

"Please, come in. I will send someone out to fetch the cake," she said, laughing at the size of it as James got out of his carriage. James hesitated before walking through the vortex. He had heard so many stories about the women of the Dead Woods, and even though he had encountered things he thought he never would in this lifetime, he was still awed by the magic of this place. "This way; I assure you it's safe."

Circe walked him through what might have been the most beautiful grounds he had ever seen. In the center of the courtyard was a fountain with a statue of a gorgon surrounded by dancing nymphs. This didn't look like a dead place to him—it was lush, and full of the same beautiful golden flowers he had seen along his way. They sparkled like sunlight, casting a magical glow on the massive stone mansion that was adorned with statues of gargoyles, dragons, and harpies.

The mansion itself was strange. To James it looked as though the solarium was an addition to the stone section of the building, which looked ancient and foreboding, while the glass-dome solarium seemed to shine with hope and love, almost as if the person who had it built meant to transform this place into something quite different from its original owner's intentions. James loved old architecture, but this was more ancient than any he had ever seen, and he was intrigued that the stone creatures that were residing on almost every available perch seemed alive. He knew they were simply carvings, but he felt something stirring within their stone visages. Maybe his imagination was simply running away with itself, but he could see deep cracks where it had looked like the creatures had dislodged themselves, only to return to the resting place. But even with these eerie stone creatures he

thought this was a beautiful place, with its shining glass dome and a garden of flowers that looked as if they were lit by the sun even in the black of night.

“You’re very observant, James. This used to be a dreary place, full of sorrow, never touched by the sun. It is still where the dead dwell, but it needn’t be shrouded in shadow and fear. It needn’t be a dead place,” said Circe, leading him to the large mansion, where two women were waiting to greet him.

“Are you a mind reader as well as a witch?” asked James, taking in the majesty of the women before him. “It seems to me much has changed since Blackbeard visited this place. It’s not at all what I expected.”

Circe smiled. “Indeed much has changed since he was here.” Just then the two other women joined them. As he stood there looking at the three women before him, he didn’t understand why Blackbeard was so fearful of them, why anyone was for that matter. These witches, if that’s what they truly were, were not hideous; they didn’t even look alike as Blackbeard had described.

“These are my aunts, Primrose and Hazel. They rule by my side here in the Dead Woods, and they also read minds.” She winked at James, disarming him completely. Hazel had gray eyes, silver hair, and alabaster skin, and Primrose had plump apple cheeks with a smattering of freckles, and ginger hair. These women were truly enchanting. James was no stranger to royalty. His father was a duke, his mother a duchess, and he was heir to his father’s title and ancestral home. He had even dined in the palace, and he was never overawed by any of it growing up, but being in the presence of these women, these queens, was something else entirely. For the first time he was unable to come up with the right words, and found himself fumbling.

“I was made to understand that you were three identical sisters, with raven hair, and stark-white frightful faces.” He was surprised he was so forthright, but he was relieved when the ladies laughed.

“You mistake us for my mothers,” said Circe. She had the most serene smile, and James could detect no malice within her. He was usually quite sharp at taking the measure of the people he met, and he could always tell their true nature even behind their sweet smiles and polite words, and with this woman he saw only goodness.

“My apologies, Queen Circe, I had no idea,” said James. He felt more nervous than he had ever been in royal company back at home.

“No need to apologize, James. My mothers have been described in far worse terms than those,” Circe said with the most gracious smile. James was enchanted by these women, and for the first time he understood the true meaning of being bewitched. He was under their spell.

“Please, James. We have been expecting you. Let’s go inside,” said Hazel.

“Yes, and let’s have some of that delicious cake you brought with you,” Primrose added. A monstrous yet dignified wraith of a man directed the cart that was carrying the cake into the courtyard. James couldn’t take his eyes off this man; when he took a closer look he realized he was not much more than a skeleton with some leathery skin stretched over his bones. Yet somehow this man, or what used to be a man, was sparkling with life, intelligence, and even kindness.

“That, James, is our grandfather, Sir Jacob, and you are right, he is a very kind man,” said Circe, smiling. James couldn’t help but be dazzled by these women—they all seemed to be glowing like the golden flowers that filled their courtyard, and somehow living among the dead seemed perfectly natural to them. These were puzzling women.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Sir Jacob,” said James, not taking his eyes from the beguiling women. “What are those enchanting flowers? I’ve seen them all over the Many Kingdoms,” he asked as they brought him through the vestibule, which was filled with wondrous carvings of all manner of frightening creatures.

“The flowers were once very rare in these lands, cultivated and hoarded by the queens before us. But we are in a new age now, one in which the Queens of the Dead share their magic,” said Circe, taking Primrose’s and Hazel’s hands.

“Are they the same flowers that have gifted Queen Tulip her immortality, and made Mrs. Tiddlebottom young again?” he asked.

Hazel turned back and gave James a look. “We knew you were very intelligent, but I didn’t imagine you would also be so intuitive. You impress me, James.”

“Thank you, my lady. It seems strange to me that the people here still fear Queen Circe’s mothers. You speak of another age. How long has it been since the Odd Sisters have passed away?” asked James, wishing Skylights had told him more about the Dead Woods.

“They have been so long away, they would not recognize the Many Kingdoms, so many things have changed since the breaking of the worlds,”

Circe said. “My mothers have not passed away; they are neither living nor dead, they are in a place between worlds where they can no longer do harm to others or themselves. I fear those in the Many Kingdoms remember their terror all too well and fear them as if they were still among us.”

“Mrs. Tiddlebottom seemed rather alarmed that they sent me on a quest to find them a cake. She said she would be paying you a visit.”

Circe sighed.

“She has reasons to fear their return to the Many Kingdoms. If they were to come back to the land of the living, all would be chaos and destruction. I will write Mrs. Tiddlebottom and assure her she needn’t worry,” said Circe, frowning. “Even though it has been an age since my mothers were locked away in the Place Between, there are those who still remember their reign of terror and fear their return.”

“Let’s not bore James with our history, Circe,” said Primrose with her cheeky smile that made creases at the sides of her small nose.

“Queen Circe is not boring me at all, Lady Primrose, I find it most interesting,” he said, wondering what Circe meant by “breaking of the worlds.”

“I mean just that,” said Circe. “Long ago, there was a fourth Odd Sister, and she was cherished by my mothers. They doted upon her, and loved her more than they loved themselves, but one terrible day the Dark Fairy, in a fit of rage over her mistreatment by the other fairies, set the Fairylands ablaze, killing their sister by mistake. So desperate were my mothers to have their sister back again, they devised a spell to create a new sister by sacrificing the best parts of themselves, but in doing so what they created was a daughter in the image of their dead sister. That spell took away the better part of their natures; everything that was good within them now belongs to their daughter, and in time the Odd Sisters’ sacrifice caused them to go mad, leading them to cause heartbreak and destruction in the many corners of the worlds. And I am that daughter.”

James didn’t know what to say. Again he felt as if he were living in a dream. Nothing that had happened since he dived off Blackbeard’s ship to save him seemed real.

“And Circe was forced to sacrifice herself so her mothers could be whole again,” Hazel said, “but her mothers wouldn’t allow it. With the help of a god they forced Circe from the Place Between, causing the worlds to break, and once again shattering themselves beyond repair. So now Circe is

here, after repairing the worlds, and seeing to the damage her mothers have done, while her mothers are trapped in the Place Between."

"And that is why the Many Kingdoms is covered in those magical flowers? You used their magic to repair the worlds?"

"Yes, that is one of the many forms of magic we used. There is far more to the story, of course, but we are not here to discuss our past," said Circe, losing herself in another place and time. James wondered what other ordeals these women had gone through. He could see their pain as clearly as he saw their kindness, but he was a gentleman and wouldn't press them for more than they were willing to share.

"That is very kind of you, James. I can see now why my mothers have been so eager for us to meet the man who broke Blackbeard's curse," said Circe.

James still didn't understand how the Odd Sisters had sent him the message to bring a cake, a cake they couldn't even eat, unless of course it was just a way to torment and frighten those who feared them like poor Mrs. Tiddlebottom. And it was beyond him how Circe knew her mothers were eager to meet him.

"Come along, James, let's make our way inside; we will be happy to answer all your questions, but we will be more comfortable in the solarium," said Primrose.

As they walked through the mansion, James marveled at the statues and carvings on the walls. This is what he expected when he thought of a place called the Dead Woods. He passed remarkably stunning rooms with carved dragons, and a library with stone crows perched on its shelves, and a room that looked like a nursery with a large stone bird's nest surrounded by ravens.

"Yes, this part of the house was built by the queens who came before us, some of them odious, and shrouded in death and misery. We decided to leave this part of our home as it was to remind us to never walk the paths of those earlier queens," said Hazel.

Their ascent to the tallest point of the mansion seemed endless until finally they reached the solarium, a room constructed completely out of glass with a magnificent view of the Dead Woods. For as far as James could see were innumerable tombs and headstones on a blanket of glittering, glowing golden flowers.

"This is truly a beautiful room," said James.

“Thank you; our sister Gothel had it built for us,” said Hazel, and he could see she became lost in those words, drifting from that time to this one like a wraith lost in the mist.

“You’re a very interesting mortal, James. You see things others do not,” said Hazel. “We wonder if you wouldn’t be happier in the Many Kingdoms.” She smiled serenely.

“We’d be more than happy to host you here in the Dead Woods,” said Primrose. “It seems to me you belong here.”

James redirected his gaze at the cemetery below them. He was having a hard time understanding how these beguiling women could live there surrounded by so much death, and he wondered if that wasn’t the reason for the sadness that seemed to pass over them like dark clouds, dimming their light.

“We are the reigning Queens of the Dead. This is our home,” said Primrose, smiling.

“It’s true, sadness clings to us like the mists, which sometimes threatens to pull us under into perpetual despair. But it’s not sadness for the world as it is now, it is sadness for what it once was, and will be again if we are not vigilant.” Hazel looked as if she were stuck somewhere between this world and the one she feared.

“It is our duty to keep and protect this land, and to make sure it never falls into the hands of my mothers again. They would see this become a place of terror, and nightmares, and have their power felt in all the worlds, including yours, James, and even in your beloved Never Land.” Circe’s words sent a deep, penetrating fear into James’s heart.

“But don’t let that frighten you. We are nothing like our mothers and sisters before us,” Primrose said, motioning to a table with a line of portraits of women in oval frames. And there he saw them, the Odd Sisters, the identical witches. Their faces seemed to stare from their place of honor, among the portraits of what he assumed were the many queens that had come before them.

“That’s right, James, this is where we honor the queens of the Dead Woods,” said Circe, reading his mind again and making him flinch. As much as he liked these women he couldn’t get used to them reading his mind, though somehow he could tell they were trying their best not to be intrusive.

“I don’t understand. It seems to me your mothers’ powers are already felt in all the worlds; how else were they able to invite me here? And why on earth did they ask me to bring them a cake?” he asked, unable to look away

from the endless graves below that surrounded the mansion, or the skeletal creatures below helping Sir Jacob bring the massive cake inside. These creatures didn't seem to be imbued with the same spirit Sir Jacob possessed. They were different, unspeaking, and lacking that spark of life James felt in their leader.

"My mothers are in possession of Opal, the Dark Fairy's cherished crow. She is now their minion, and she dwells in the space between, but unlike my mothers she is free to travel between the worlds. They are able to send messages with her, and speak to us through a magic mirror I gave them if only to save poor Opal from flying back and forth between the worlds with their many messages." She laughed, but James could tell her laugh was wry, and that Circe was beyond what he would consider heartbroken.

"It seems to me your mothers like to trifle with the lives of others, simply for the pleasure of doing so," he said. "Asking me to get them a cake, knowing full well where I would have to procure it, and knowing the terror it would cause—it's mean-spirited." This made the ladies laugh, and to James it seemed they hadn't laughed so much in quite a while.

Primrose was laughing so hard she was wiping tears from her cheeks. "Mean-spirited, that's sweet."

Even Hazel, the most stoic of the three, was overcome by fits of laughter. "Yes, James, you're right. They are mean-spirited, but that is the least of their crimes."

"Well, whatever their reason for bringing me here, I am honored and privileged to have met you fine ladies."

"Honestly, we doubted you would ever come, it's been so many years since Blackbeard visited the Dead Woods, long before you were born. But the Odd Sisters always insisted you would come to us once Blackbeard finally gifted you the *Jolly Roger*," said Circe.

"That's impossible. Blackbeard couldn't have been more than twenty years older than me," said James.

"My mothers cursed Blackbeard with the inability to rest neither in life nor with the release of death. It was his punishment for taking their treasures."

James was horrified. "What do you mean?"

"He lived an extraordinarily long life, James. One in which he wasn't permitted to sleep, and no matter how mortally wounded he was, he could not die. I hope now he is finally at rest," said Circe.

“Oh, I hope so, too,” said Primrose. “He seemed to be longing for release whenever we looked in on him. I do hope he is finally at peace.” James wondered how it was Primrose was able to *look in on him*. “One of the treasures Blackbeard took from the Odd Sisters was one of their many magic mirrors; those in possession of the mirrors can see and communicate with each other if they wish. That is also how the Odd Sisters communicate with us.”

James was feeling the loss of Blackbeard even more profoundly in that moment than the day he had left him in the Floating Boneyard. Though now he had a better understanding of why he was ready to take his leave of the world. He had no idea Blackbeard had been under so much torment. Though James had never encountered it firsthand, he understood now why Blackbeard was known for his bad temper and cutthroat ways. He must have suffered incomprehensible anguish. It’s no wonder he was so eager for James to tell the Odd Sisters he had finally given the *Jolly Roger* to someone who had saved his life, why he was so eager to break this curse that had been tormenting him for so long.

“Maybe I’m just unclear how magic works, but why make Blackbeard send me all the way here? Wouldn’t he have released himself from the curse by fulfilling his end of the bargain?”

“Some witches work that way, but the Odd Sisters wanted you to come here for some reason. That is why they made that part of Blackbeard’s payment.” James could see Circe was still trying to work this out for herself. That she, too, was often confused by her own mothers’ behavior. Well, whatever their reason, James was happy to be in the company of these women, even if he did miss Blackbeard terribly, and even more so now that he knew what the pirate had endured.

“I’m sorry you miss your friend, James. I know he sent you here in hopes of finding Never Land, but I fear you won’t find the life you are looking for there. I’m sorry to say it won’t be as you remember it,” said Primrose.

“How do you know this?”

“I see a terrible fate for you if you go to Never Land. It was written in our souls as it is written in the Book of Fairy Tales,” said Hazel. “Won’t you write a story of your own, James? Won’t you make a life for yourself here rather than take the path the Odd Sisters have predetermined for you?” Her serene smile did nothing to hide the sorrow in her heart.

There was a part of James that felt very at home in the Dead Woods. He couldn't explain it. He liked these women, and he liked these lands. They were probably even more fascinating than his beloved Never Land, but he felt a panic surge through him, as if he were being taken off course by a terrible storm, the sort he had read about in the Norse sagas, the type of storm that carried you away from your dreams.

So much of what had happened after the battle with the Kraken seemed unreal to him, and James wondered if all of this was all some sort of trick. He had read stories of gruesome witches disguising themselves as beautiful enchantresses to gain the trust of their victims before they betrayed them, and he was starting to fear he had fallen into a similar trap. He certainly felt as if he was taken off course, and thrust into a world that didn't seem real. "I don't believe you," he said, standing up.

"It's all written in the Book of Fairy Tales, James. Your fate was written long ago, but I do believe we can help you to change it."

"How do you know what is written within its pages if it's been locked away in Blackbeard's chest?" he asked.

"James, calm down; we are not my mothers in disguise, and we are not deceiving you," said Circe. "The Queens of the Dead have been the authors of the Book of Fairy Tales since the first queen wrote in its pages. It is inscribed on our souls. Time means nothing where the dead dwell. You have seen with your own eyes how we drift in and out of time, how we experience the past and future as if it is happening now, because, dear James, it is. All time is one. We tether ourselves to this time line because this is where we are needed most."

"You have nothing to fear from us, James, but we would have our book back," said Hazel, smiling at him.

"I admit I had hoped to tempt your mothers with it in exchange for passage to Never Land," he said. "Are you willing to do the same? Will you show me the way if I give you the book?" he asked, sitting back down.

"You need no such bargaining. Never Land is exactly where they want you; going there sets you on the path they predestined for you. You're lucky you're dealing with us, James, and not the Odd Sisters. They would manipulate you, and send you down the road of ruin and despair, even if they had a mind to help you," said Primrose.

"I am quite adept at avoiding manipulative mothers," said James, making Primrose laugh.

“So you are. We will help you find Never Land, James, if you’re determined to go. Circe is bound to grant you your wish as part of the pact her mothers made with Blackbeard, but we can’t send you off to Never Land without a warning that we see terrible things for you there. The life you seek isn’t in Never Land.”

“This is nonsense. I don’t believe you. I have wanted nothing more in my entire life. It is my fondest wish.”

“Are you sure that is your fondest wish, James?” asked Circe, eyeing him. She saw there was a secret wish in his heart he was not sharing with them. “Because all you will acquire in Never Land is your pirate’s name and disillusionment. Your losses will be greater than you can fathom.”

“Surely one’s fate isn’t written? Don’t I have the power to direct my own life? I can’t believe we can’t choose for ourselves. Didn’t I change Blackbeard’s fate by saving him from the Kraken? Didn’t he change mine by defeating the captain of the *Flying Dutchman*?”

James’s words seemed to cause Circe pain; she closed her eyes and composed herself before she replied. “You do have the power to direct your own fate, James—that is what we’re trying to tell you. Right now you’re on my mothers’ path, and very few who have walked the path the Odd Sisters have laid out for them survived to tell their tale. James, did you not hear the voices of the Odd Sisters on the winds when you faced the *Dreaded Queen*, did you not see their face in the sea creature, or feel their power when Blackbeard used their tinderbox? Everything that’s happened since you fell out of your pram has been by their design. Don’t you see what you’re dealing with, James?”

“I refuse to believe this. I will not accept that the Odd Sisters have been ushering me along my entire life. Toward what aim? You say the stories are written on your soul, then tell me, why do they want me in Never Land so desperately?”

“I fear if I shared your fate you’d just think it gave you the power to avoid it, and it won’t. The moment you arrive in Never Land you will be lost.”

“If all time is one as you say, and my story has been written, and is being written at the same time, then doesn’t that prove I can change my fate? Won’t you please just show me the way to Never Land?”

James admired the ladies of the Dead Woods but he was starting to wonder if he should just take this up with the Odd Sisters. Hazel narrowed her eyes at him, hearing his thoughts.

“Do not think of dealing with the Odd Sisters, James. They can also see into your heart and wish to exploit it. We want to help you. We know your greatest wish, your secret wish, but we cannot make it come to pass; it is not within our power. But we can offer you a better life here, and if you refuse and insist on going to Never Land despite our warnings, then we will give you the magic you need to get there. The rest is up to you. You’ve heard our warnings, will you not heed them?” asked Hazel.

A wind swept into the room through the open windows, bringing with it a cascade of voices that spoke as one. It extinguished the candles, leaving them in darkness except for the glowing flower petals that were brought in on the breeze.

“He will spend his days in regret if he doesn’t follow his dreams. He has spent his life longing to return to Never Land. It’s all he’s ever wanted, his heart is consumed by it. Let us not forget what happens to those who do not fulfill their destinies.”

The voice on the wind seemed to be coming from nowhere and everywhere at once, filling the room with its sound.

“But why must it be his destiny? Why can’t he choose another path? Surely we changed ours,” said Primrose, looking at the portraits of the queens that came before her. James realized it was the former queens of this place that were now speaking.

“Did you change your fate, Primrose? Are you not now ruling the lands you wanted nothing more than to escape?” James saw the light dim in Primrose’s eyes and her face crumble into despair. He knew there was truth in the dead queens’ voices, and he hoped they were right, and that his destiny was to be in Never Land.

“Nothing you say will sway him from his purpose. All you can do is warn him. The choice is his,” said the voice that sounded like many speaking in perfect harmony. But the voices stopped as suddenly as they started, and the room felt as it had before they were visited by the spirits of the dead queens.

“Yes, James that was the voice of our sisters, our mothers, and their mothers before them, speaking to us as one from beyond the veil. And they are right, we cannot keep you from going to Never Land if that is what you truly want.” Primrose waved her hand at the pianoforte, making it play on its own and causing James to spin in its direction. “But you will do one thing for us in return,” she said in a soft whisper so the spirits of the previous queens of the dead could not hear her above the piano music.

“Give us the wooden box with the eye, the one Blackbeard gave you,” she said with a sly smile that unnerved James.

“If I give you this box, you will send me to Never Land?” he asked, lowering his voice.

“We will, and with heavy hearts,” said Circe. “Is there nothing we can say to change your mind, James? Nothing more we can offer you? Wouldn’t you like to make a life for yourself here? Ours, too, is a magical land, and I have sensed that you feel at home here. You’ve seen so little of it and already you hold it in high esteem, if for nothing else but its beauty. Imagine what you would make of it if you were to spend more time here.”

James could see that Circe meant it, but even this bewitching land couldn’t sway him from his life’s purpose.

“You’re right. I am drawn to this world, and perhaps if I came here when I fell out of my pram so many years ago I would have made it my mission to come back and live my days here in the splendor of you beguiling ladies of the dead. But don’t you see, Queen Circe, how much I need to find Never Land again? That I am able to resist your tempting offer, and give up living in such a place, which has intrigued me like no other, that it truly means I am meant for Never Land?”

“Sometimes we mistake our wishes for our fate, James,” said Hazel. “But you are bound to grant me this wish, and that is what I want, though it breaks my heart to give you grief. Then so be it. Bring us the box with the eye and we will enchant your ship so it may fly to Never Land. We will meet you at Morningstar Harbor tomorrow evening and make the exchange then,” said Hazel. Her tone was irritated and serious, and she had a look of great sadness in her eyes. James could see all the women truly wished he would stay, but he couldn’t bring himself to be distracted from finding Never Land.

“Well, I think it’s time we had some cake!” said Primrose, laughing, trying to lighten the mood of the room. Of the three she was the most lighthearted, even though she too seemed burdened by time, and duty, not to mention worry for the choice he had made.

“You are a very unusual mortal, James,” said Circe. “It’s no wonder my mothers have had their eye on you. I wish you had never gotten their attention; I wonder then what you would have made of your life.” Her words chilled a place in his heart that reminded him of seeing the candles underwater in the Floating Boneyard.

“But let’s not dwell on the things we cannot change. The Odd Sisters did make you bring that magnificent cake all this way, we might as well

enjoy it!” said Primrose, making Circe and Hazel laugh with her. Just then Sir Jacob and four skeletal creatures entered the room with the enormous cake. It was such an odd sight, the juxtaposition of it, these smiling women living amid monsters.

“They are not monsters, James, but men very much like you. More like you than you even realize. They are our responsibility and our family.” Hazel put her hand out to one of the creatures as if to comfort it, making James feel instantly ashamed.

“Please excuse me, Lady Hazel,” he said. “There are so many things about this land I don’t understand. I didn’t mean offense.”

“We are not offended, James. We know you have a good heart. We just wonder how much longer it will remain so,” said Circe. “We would be only too happy to share all of our stories with you, we would sit with you and read the Book of Fairy Tales, you could read about the Odd Sisters, how they came to be, about Sir Jacob, and the many queens of the Dead Woods. There are wondrous tales within its pages, even stories that involve your lands. You could read them all, if only you agreed to stay here with us,” said Circe, her eyes sparkling with tears.

“Do not cry, dear Circe. Let us enjoy this beautiful cake before I depart and realize my dream. Who knows? Maybe my travels will bring me back here again,” said James. He knew he would probably never return, but he very much liked the idea of seeing these women again.

“We do have one final request of you, James,” Circe said, her expression suddenly serious. “Do not open the box.” The look she gave him transformed her face into something almost fierce.

“I have no reason to, my lady. Besides, Blackbeard already warned me not to,” he said.

“Wonderful. Then let us eat this delightful-looking cake,” said Primrose. “And we will enjoy these last moments with you, and pretend as though you are not breaking our hearts.”

Chapter X

The Odd Sisters

James was happy to return to his ship that night, away from the Dead Woods, and would be happier still once he was well away from the Many Kingdoms. As much as he enjoyed the ladies of the Dead Woods, he felt as if he could become lost there, drifting in and out of time like the beguiling women who called the beautiful and foreboding place home. The magic was thick in the air in this realm, and thicker still in the Dead Woods. He could breathe a bit easier the moment he left, but he longed to be once again at sea. Perhaps then he could shake the sadness that still clung to him. He couldn't stop thinking about what Circe and her aunts had said to him, that this was all part of the Odd Sisters' plan, and he wouldn't be happy in Never Land. He couldn't remember ever being happier than he had been when he was there as a small child. The thought of going to the place of his dreams and being unhappy there was unfathomable. It was all he'd ever wanted. And even though he thought the ladies of the Dead Woods were wise and powerful, they also seemed deeply troubled to him, and he convinced

himself they weren't seeing his story clearly, and felt in his heart this life was his, and he had the power to direct it.

James was happy to see that Smee had been busy while he was in the Dead Woods, gathering more provisions for their long journey to Never Land. He had prepared a feast of a dinner that was ready upon James's return, for which he was grateful, because all he had eaten that day was cake.

As he sat there recounting the day, and all the sights he had seen on his way, he wondered why it was he had never read of this land, or the strange witches that inhabited it. Part of him wondered if he should heed Circe's warnings, but then how could he live with himself if he didn't see his dream through? Would he always see himself as a failure, too cowardly to travel to the place he always wanted to live? He wished Blackbeard were here; he would know what to do. It felt strange and lonely to take his meals in the captain's quarters alone. He had so many questions for him that would never be answered. Then he remembered the Book of Fairy Tales; surely the answers were in that great tome. And the moment it came to his mind, he heard a rattling sound coming from within the wooden box with the eye, which was on the other side of the room.

He slowly made his way to the box, remembering Circe's and Blackbeard's warnings not to open it. Instead, he bent down and examined it, and when he brought his ear close he realized he could hear voices coming from within. He stepped back quickly in shock. Then, gingerly, he picked it up and placed it on his bed. He sat there watching it shudder and tremble, the voices within getting louder, and shaking so violently it fell off the bed and opened.

Lying on the floorboards among the other items that had spilled out was an ornately framed mirror with the face of a frightful-looking woman staring at him intensely. James recognized her instantly from the portrait in the Dead Woods, in the place of honor among the other queens of the dead. Now, though, she wasn't frozen in time. She was quite alive and animated. And she was laughing. James wondered how such a woman could be Circe's mother.

She was disturbingly pale, with high cheekbones and overly large eyes. Her hair was black and curled into ringlets, and was adorned with red plumage that matched her lip color. She was wearing a silver necklace like Queen Circe's, the three phases of the moon, the full moon at its center.

"Hello, James," said the woman in the mirror. "I am Lucinda, Circe's mother. I see you have already betrayed my daughter and Blackbeard by

opening the box.” She narrowed her eyes at him. He quickly gathered the things up, shoved them in the box, and slammed the lid closed again. A cacophony of laughter came from within, so loud James was afraid his crew would hear it.

“I didn’t open the box! You did by knocking it onto the floor. What do you want?” he asked, opening the box slowly and revealing the woman’s face in the mirror.

“That is my question to you, James. What is your heart’s desire?”

“As I told your daughter, I want to go to Never Land,” he said. He was certain he could hear two other voices screeching in the mirror aside from Lucinda’s, but he could not see them.

“And what of your poor mother, James? What of your ancestral home? What of the promise you made to yourself when you were in your watery grave? Have you forgotten your duty?” She smiled eerily, and then the image in the mirror shifted, showing his mother in mourning clothes, crying and alone in her sitting room.

“What’s happened to my mother? Who died?” he asked, grasping the mirror’s gilded frame.

“Your father has drifted beyond the veil, leaving her alone to fend for herself. She will soon lose her home if you don’t help her.”

James could not bear Lucinda’s insipid smile, and something about her eyes frightened him. There was something else stirring behind her eyes, and it seemed to him her smile was a contorted mask holding back madness. This woman frightened him.

“Surely things have not progressed so far in the short time I’ve been away,” James said. He felt frantic, helpless, regretting he was not there to help his mother. Even if he didn’t want the life she had planned for him, he wouldn’t go back on his word; he wouldn’t let her be ruined.

“Time runs differently here, James. Though you’ve been here a day, many years have passed in the human realm.” He couldn’t fathom how so much time had passed in his own world while he was in this one, and he became anxious for his mother, reminding himself of his promise. He didn’t want to delay his trip to Never Land, but decided he’d better talk to his men about planning a raid, or going back to where the *Dreaded Queen* had sunk into the ocean to see if they could retrieve its treasure. “But you already have the treasures you need at your fingertips. Take the contents of this box to London, and sell all but the mirror and iron clock to that shop in Eaton Square. It will be more than enough for your mother to pay the death duties

and save the estate. Then you can go to Never Land as you wish," said Lucinda.

"I've already made a deal with Circe. She is sending me to Never Land," said James.

"Are you sure she will keep her promise, James? I know she tried to talk you into staying in the Dead Woods. What's to stop her from going back on her word?"

"Queen Circe doesn't seem like a liar to me. I think she will keep her promise, though I doubt you would should I ever be foolish enough to make a deal with you."

"We have no intention of going back on our promise, James. Unlike Circe, we want you to go to Never Land; it, too, is our greatest wish to send you there, because we want you to bring us Tinker Bell in exchange for your true wish."

In that moment he felt he understood their motivations for wanting him in Never Land, and he didn't understand why Circe didn't just share that with him. Perhaps she was trying to protect the fairy; he didn't know, but to James it didn't seem like a sinister plot that involved him other than getting the Odd Sisters something they wanted in exchange for what he truly wanted.

"What do you want with Tinker Bell?" he asked. He knew who Tinker Bell was; she was in all of Peter Pan's stories, the ones he had learned as a young boy. Tinker Bell was one of Peter's greatest companions. Never Land wouldn't be the same without her.

"She belongs in the Many Kingdoms, James. She was sent from here many years ago by her own ilk, never to return. You are right to think Circe is trying to protect the fairy, but Tinker Bell is not that fairy. She is in league with the fairies who banished her, and now the poor dear is lost and adrift in Never Land. We simply wish to bring her home again," said Lucinda.

"What if she doesn't want to come back?" asked James, narrowing his eyes at Lucinda as he remembered Circe's warnings about her mothers.

"Then you take her by force. The High Fairy of this land took her memories of this place. Once the tinker fairy returns she will be happy to be home again. You know what it's like to be far from the place you hold dear in your heart," said Lucinda, feigning sympathy as best she could.

He did know how the poor fairy felt; he had felt that way since he had been snatched from Never Land. Maybe somewhere inside, Tinker Bell felt this sense of loss, too, but didn't know why because her memories had been

taken from her. But he wondered if the witch was being honest. He seemed to remember knowing that Tinker Bell was from Never Land, but it was a memory faded into the thin mist of his childhood time in Never Land so long ago.

"If you agree to do this we will give you the magic fairy dust you need to get to Never Land, though we only have enough to get you there. You will need Tinker Bell's to get you back. If you don't capture her you will be trapped in Never Land forever," she said, her head oddly tilted to one side as if she was listening to someone else as she was talking to him.

The idea of being trapped in Never Land forever didn't sound like a terrible fate—that was exactly what he wanted—though he still didn't see why he should help the Odd Sisters when he could just as easily give Circe what she wanted in exchange for passage to Never Land.

"We have the power to grant your true wish, the one hiding within your soul. The wish my daughter refuses to give you," said Lucinda, laughing.

"Do you truly? If you can give me my greatest wish, my secret desire, then I will do as you ask," he said, wondering if he was doing the right thing. Part of him wanted to leave this place with Blackbeard's treasures, never to return, and find another way to Never Land. He felt like he was not only betraying Circe, but also Blackbeard, and yet he didn't feel he had another choice. Selling Blackbeard's treasures would ensure his mother's future, and if Lucinda had the power to send him to Never Land *and* grant his secret wish, the one she and Circe saw buried deep within his heart . . .

"Go back to London and sell that treasure as quickly as you can. The items in that box are cursed, and you'd do well to be rid of them as quickly as possible. Once you do, you will be free to go to Never Land."

He hated betraying Blackbeard and the ladies of the Dead Woods, but he saw no other way to save his mother, and get what he truly wanted.

"I will do as you ask," he said.

"That's a good boy," Lucinda said. "We will tell you where to find the magic you need to get to Never Land once you are finished with your business in London." And then with peals of laughter she disappeared from the magic mirror.

James felt a cold shiver penetrate his body again. He wondered if this was how everyone who dealt with the Odd Sisters felt, and then he remembered what Blackbeard had said. And he thought perhaps he was just afraid because he was one step closer to realizing his dream.

Chapter XI

The Curiosity Shop

The Odd Sisters were right; many years had passed since James was in London last. The woman who sold violets on the corner was much older, and some of the shops had changed, but the little shop in Eaton Square he had visited before he ventured to the Many Kingdoms was still there. When he entered the shop the little brass bell above the door jingled, alerting the shopkeeper. While he was a great deal older now, no longer the young man James had met when he bought his first pirate clothes, he still recognized him.

"Good evening, sir," the shopkeeper said as he came out from behind the curtain. "What may I help you with?"

"Thank you, good man. I have several things I would like to sell," said James, opening the box. Inside were a jade brooch, jade earrings, and the Book of Fairy Tales. And at the last moment he decided he'd try to sell the golden boot buckles as well, having slipped them in the box before leaving for the shop. He had left the mirror and iron clock back at the ship locked in his desk, and had the key on a strap of leather he wore around his neck.

“These are very fine, sir,” said the shopkeeper, eyeing the treasures. “I’d love nothing more than to buy them, but they are a bit too dear for me,” he said, frowning.

“Would it help to know these were plundered by a great pirate, and were brought here from a distant magical land?” asked James. “I’ll bet that would spark the imaginations of the lords and ladies who frequent your little shop looking for curiosities.” He could see the gears in the shopkeeper’s mind turn. James could see why the man would be hesitant to buy so many expensive items at once, to have so much of his money tied up in his stock, but James needed to do everything he could to make sure he got the money he needed to help his mother. So he did what he did best. He talked.

“Yes, can you tell me more?” asked the old man. And that was James’s cue. He shared the story with the man as he took a turn around the shop regaling him with Blackbeard’s story, using dramatic flourishes, and sometimes acting out the scenes. He wove a tale of high adventure, and conjured images in the shopkeeper’s mind, until he saw at last the man wanted nothing more than to tell the same stories to the people who came into his shop. While walking around the shop, James looked for the coat he had coveted when he was there last, the red one that had flashed in his imagination since he first saw it. He had little hope of finding it since so much time had passed, but then he saw it: the crimson frock coat trimmed in gold, the one he thought was fit for a captain. It was still here after all these years, and alongside it sat a magnificent pirate’s hat with a large white plume.

“Do you have a place for me to try this on?” he asked as the shopkeeper examined the treasures in the box, eyeing them like a greedy dragon.

“Yes, sir, right in there,” said the man, giving James a queer look, and James wondered if this man remembered him and wondered how he hadn’t aged. Then he laughed, realizing that of course the man was looking at him strangely; it probably wasn’t every day a pirate came waltzing into his shop to sell his treasure.

“Shall I take the cost of the coat and hat from the balance then, sir?” asked the shopkeeper when James stepped out of the dressing area, having clearly decided he wanted to buy the items.

“Yes, thank you, good man,” said James. “And I hope it’s not a great disappointment, but I think I’ve changed my mind about selling the boot buckles; I’ve found that I cannot part with them after all.” He already felt selling Blackbeard’s treasures was a betrayal; he couldn’t sell the boot

buckles as well. “I wager the other items will still offer a handsome price?” James hoped he would have enough to help his mother even without the gold boot buckles, but he decided if he had to sell them he would, and that way he could part with them with less guilt.

“Oh yes, sir, very handsome indeed,” the man said, writing a figure on a piece of paper and handing it to him.

“This will do quite nicely,” said James, smiling, feeling the weight of his obligation to his mother lifted from his shoulders, as well as his obligation to the Odd Sisters, and he was happy to have something to remember his friend by. Not that he needed reminding; he thought of Blackbeard often and missed him greatly. “It has been a pleasure doing business with you, good man. I doubt you will have any trouble at all selling these treasures, especially if you tell your patrons they were procured by a pirate.”

“Are you the pirate from the story, then?” asked the shopkeeper, his eyes wide.

“No,” said James with a smile. “But I am the pirate from *my story*.”

James left the little shop, his wooden chest now bursting with currency, and his heart filled with hope. He had more than enough money to help his mother, and he reasoned if Blackbeard were alive he would approve of his choice. At least that is what he hoped. He did, after all, keep the boot buckles, and he had to admit he couldn’t wait to see what they looked like with his new hat and coat. He wore the coat and hat out of the shop, feeling at last like a proper pirate. He felt alive, and he was tingling with excitement. He was getting closer to fulfilling his obligations to the Odd Sisters, and realizing his dream. He was now embarking on the grandest of adventures, and he would soon be making his way to Never Land as the captain of his own ship, and with a pirate crew at his disposal. Life was good. But first he had one last thing to attend to.

He had to go home.

James hadn’t expected to feel such sorrow seeing his mother so much older and in such a state of grief. He saw her sitting near her favorite fountain, where she and James’s papa would sit in the quiet of the morning, but now the gardens were overgrown, and his mama’s once inky-black hair was

streaked with silver. She looked lonely and heartbroken, but he couldn't bring himself to face her; he knew she would plead with him to stay, and there was a part of him that wanted to. He was all she had left now, and it broke his heart. He snuck into the house through the servants' entrance, and put the wooden box filled with banknotes on her vanity, along with a little note.

Dear Mama,

I am deeply saddened to learn of Papa's passing, and your current circumstances. Please accept this gift, knowing I have never forgotten my duty, nor my love for you.

Most sincerely,

James

Chapter XII

To Never Land

As soon as James was back aboard the ship, he went directly to his quarters to admire his new coat and hat in the mirror. At last he looked like a captain. He had done what Lucinda had asked, he had helped his mother save her home, and now he was about to start a fantastic journey. He felt guilty for not speaking with his mother, but he had waited long enough to find Never Land.

He had one more task before he could set sail—he had to call Lucinda on her magic mirror. She had told him to let her know once he settled things in London and she would give him the means to fly to Never Land. He couldn't believe this was all finally happening. His hands were shaking as he went to his desk, unlocked the drawer, and opened it. Lucinda's face was already there in the magic mirror, waiting for him when he slid the drawer open. "Good grief, must you always be lurking in this mirror?"

"Hello, James. Did you sell everything in the box except for the mirror and iron clock as we asked?"

“I did,” he said. “But I don’t understand why you wanted me to keep the clock.”

“To keep track of time, of course,” she said, laughing. “I see you bought the crimson coat, just as it’s written in the Book of Fairy Tales. It will go nicely with the golden buckles Blackbeard gave you.”

“Am I truly in this book? How do you know of the boot buckles?” asked James, wondering why he didn’t think to read his story before he sold it to the shopkeeper.

“Yes, your story started long before the day you fell out of your pram,” she said, smiling. “We have been watching you ever since.” He could hear the laughter of other women in the background, but as before he could not see them.

“Circe says you have been watching me since before I was born, but I don’t see how that could be,” he said, looking into Lucinda’s eyes, which were now filled with anger.

“Circe speaks in nothing but riddles now that she rules the Dead Woods. She is lost in the mists of time, and she is lost to us, though she doesn’t now see it,” said Lucinda, her sisters laughing from out of James’s view in the mirror. Lucinda looked as if she was listening to one of her sisters speak to her.

“Where are these sisters of yours? I can hear them, but I see only you,” he said, not able to keep himself from asking.

“Circe didn’t tell you what she did to us? If you wish to know Circe’s shame, she must share it with you herself,” Lucinda said. Her voice sounded hollow, and was not accompanied by laughter. James couldn’t imagine Circe doing anything that would bring herself shame, or hurting anyone she loved, and his regret for betraying her was starting to weigh on his heart.

“I see my daughter has beguiled you, James. It’s true she has the best of intentions. She is ruled by her heart, and does what she thinks is right, but we, too, have always done the same, and where did that get us? Trapped here, neither living nor dead. Don’t forget Circe is us, and we are her,” she said.

James hardly knew what to say. Intimate conversations made him uneasy, and he was having so many of them as of late, and he was starting to find these witches’ riddles and half-truths tiresome. He was eager to start his journey. He was growing tired of this conversation, and wanted to get to the point, but didn’t want to give Lucinda another reason to become angry with him.

“I suppose you’re wondering where we’ve hidden the magic that will take you to Never Land?” she asked. “All you have to do is reach into your pocket.”

“What nonsense is this?” asked James.

“The magic is there, in your pocket,” said Lucinda, her smile now returning.

James reached into his pocket and found a small glass vial, with a cork, that had sparkling dust within.

“This is all I need to get to Never Land? *This?*” he said, looking at the tiny vial. “And it’s been in the pocket of this coat the entire time? I almost bought this coat before we met.”

“We know. It’s been sitting in the shop waiting for you all these years, since we asked Blackbeard to put it there,” said Lucinda, laughing along with the faceless laughter of what James assumed were her sisters.

“What do you mean, you asked Blackbeard to put it there? Why didn’t he just tell me where I could find the dust? Why send me on this needless and maddening journey?” James found himself frustrated, as if he’d been ushered about since the beginning. And he felt the crushing weight of Circe’s warnings, and dismissed them and his fear at once.

“Blackbeard didn’t know the vial was in the pocket. He was simply completing a task in exchange for his wish. Had he known the dust in the vial could be used to travel to Never Land I am sure he would have told you. He loved you like a son, James, the son he always wanted and wished for, the son we gave him,” said Lucinda.

“What are you saying?” asked James, making Lucinda laugh her maddening laugh.

“You know Blackbeard took our treasures, but you don’t know the reason he came to us in the first place. He wanted a son, or someone he could love like one. And that is what we gave him; you, in exchange for taking that coat to the shop in Eaton Square.”

“You’re telling me that he lived his life in torment, suffering never to rest, only to die after he found the love of a son? You’re a wicked woman, Lucinda. I’m sorrier than ever I’ve made a deal with you.”

“You had no other choice. It was already written. We cursed Blackbeard with eternal life for taking our treasures; had we not done so he would have never found you, and brought you to us so we might show you the way to Never Land. It’s all worked out nicely, wouldn’t you say?” Lucinda looked very pleased with herself.

James wished more than ever he had kept the Book of Fairy Tales, or asked Circe to share his story with him. Since the day he fell from his pram he felt as if he was being ushered along a path that would lead him to his dream, but now he saw that it was the Odd Sisters who had schemed and meddled like the very hands of the fates themselves. He wondered if he should have listened to Circe's warnings, and he was starting to fear she was telling the truth.

"My daughter knows nothing of fate," said Lucinda, reading James's mind. "She thinks fate is changeable, even though all of time and its stories are written on her soul, and to change those stories would be a breaking of her core. You saw how tortured she was, how sad and tired, because she is trying to change stories that are already written, but we've learned after so many years of heartbreak and destruction of trying to do the same. It's our duty, my sisters and I, to make sure events play out as they are written. You have been given a gift, James. You have the means to find Never Land again. Will you let your fear of realizing your dreams keep you from that and your fondest wish, your true wish, what you want most of all, once you get to Never Land?" she asked, looking rather serious and serene, and in the moment he saw how this woman was Circe's mother.

"How do I use the powder?" he asked, holding the vial up to the lantern to get a better look. It was a beautiful thing seeing it glitter in the light, dancing within the bottle as if it were longing to be released. He decided in that moment he couldn't escape his fate; whatever the cost he would go to Never Land, and he would get his dearest wish.

"Put it into the palm of your hand, and blow it toward your sails. The magic will do the rest. Just head to the second star from the right, and sail straight on until morning." Lucinda narrowed her eyes at him. "I sense you have a question, James, something to do with my daughter."

"Do you think she will be very cross with me for going back on my word?"

"You leave Circe to me," she said.

"But she is Queen of the Dead," he said, regretting his betrayal, but there was no way around it. Circe said it wasn't within her power to give him his secret wish, the one hidden deep within his heart, the thing he wanted even more than finding Never Land. But he couldn't help but feel guilty for betraying her, and Blackbeard, even if it meant helping his mother and receiving his heart's desire.

“Circe may be Queen of the Dead, but I am her mother, and those treasures belonged to me, not Circe and not Blackbeard, and I shall do with them what I will. Never mind Circe; she can’t give you what you truly want. Now go. Off to Never Land, and right back with Tinker Bell, then you can start living the life you always dreamed of,” said Lucinda, smiling.

James took a deep breath as he stood in front of his mirror and admired his outfit again. His hair had become much longer during his time with Blackbeard, and he had grown a dandy mustache that was long and pointed. He only needed one more thing to make his outfit complete: his gold boot buckles. The ones Blackbeard had given him. They did make him feel fearful when he held them in his hands, but he missed Blackbeard, and felt by wearing them he was bringing him along on this important journey.

“Blackbeard said you didn’t curse the boot buckles, is that true?” he asked, taking them out of his pocket.

“I vow to you on the spirits of my sisters we didn’t curse those boot buckles,” she said. Before he could ask anything else, her image vanished from the mirror.

When he put them on he felt the same foreboding as when Blackbeard had given him the precious gift. He felt fearful. He took a deep breath, and looked down at his boot buckles, and was overcome by a surge of panic that was so strong he wanted to smash the vial of pixie dust. He didn’t understand exactly what it was he was feeling. It seemed like an instinct—something deep within him telling him he was making a mistake, that he needed to abandon this trip. Then he remembered Blackbeard’s words:

“Realizing one’s dreams can be a terrifying venture, for fear they don’t meet one’s expectations.”

James pushed his fear aside, turned from the mirror, and with a theatrical flourish of his coat, he left his quarters to embark at last on his adventure. Trying to banish all fear and doubt from his heart. He was ready.

James clasped the pixie dust in his hand as he stood on the deck of the *Jolly Roger*. The full moon was bright in the sky, glowing behind the stunning and glittering London backdrop. He had never seen a night more lovely than this one. The sky sparkled with starlight, and his heart raced as he realized he was headed in that direction: to Never Land, the realm among the stars. It

was as if he was seeing things more clearly now. He wasn't sure if it was the pixie dust, but everything was more vivid, and the stakes felt higher. Maybe it was because he was finally and truly on his way to Never Land, or perhaps it was the magic in the air, but he felt more alive than he had when he was trapped in his old life. And now he could venture anywhere he liked without guilt or obligation to his family. His only obligation was to Lucinda, to capture and bring Tinker Bell back to her. A small price to pay to get what he truly longed for.

A small price to pay for a wonderful life.

"How hard could it be to capture a fairy?" he said as he emptied the little vial of fairy dust onto the palm of his hand. He took a deep breath and then blew the dust upward toward the sails. Floating magically on the wind, the sparkling dust spiraled up into the night, making the sails glitter.

"Take your positions, gentlemen, we are going to Never Land!" he said, pointing to the sky, where the glittering dust moved up and mingled with the stars. The ship sailed forward, then took flight, riding on the magic dust. "To the second star on the right!" he yelled to Skylights, who was at the helm. James stood on the deck marveling at the sights. They were surrounded by clouds; the moon seemed to take up the entirety of the sky. James's coat blew in the breeze, and as they sailed higher and higher his heart grew lighter. It was as if the closer to Never Land he came, the less he was burdened by the worries and sorrows that weighed on him when he was in London, or in the Many Kingdoms for that matter. He was starting to feel young again, and untethered. He had never felt more excited in his life, and before he knew it, and well before he expected it was morning, and he realized they had sailed too high. Never Land was below him, but he was so happy to see it at this vantage point. The sight of it took his breath away; he was home at last.

The ship landed in a lagoon near where the Lost Boys were playing. It was like seeing old friends again, and his heart leaped for the joy of it. James darted to the starboard side, his arms stretched out as if waiting to be embraced by his old friends. "My friends! I am back home at last!"

James was so happy to be home again, to see his friends so happy, and so free of the burdens adults carry in their souls. He could hardly believe he was there at last.

"Ahoy there, young men!" James couldn't contain his joy. "What game are you playing today? May I join you?"

“Away with you, pirate! We are not men, young or otherwise!” said Peter with an indignant look on his face.

“We are old friends, you and I. Won’t you greet me as such? Surely you remember me, Peter?” asked James, smiling and waiting for his old friend to recognize him.

“I am not in the habit of making friends with pirates,” said Peter, scoffing. “Shouldn’t you be off trying to steal someone’s treasure, or kidnapping them? Whoever heard of a pirate trying to make friends?” said Peter, making the Lost Boys stop their antics and laugh. Foxy, Rabbit, Skunk, and the Raccoon Twins had Cubby in a giant slingshot, about to send him reeling across the lagoon.

“Come on, get your ship out of the way, we’re trying to launch Cubby!” said Skunk.

“Yeah, get out of here! You’re ruining our game!” said Rabbit.

“Yeah, who said you could land in our lagoon anyway?” said Foxy, sticking his tongue out at James.

“Do none of you recognize me? Surely you do, Peter!” said James, feeling keenly aware his men were watching, and he was starting to feel foolish.

James hadn’t realized Tinker Bell was on Peter’s shoulder until he saw her whisper something into his ear, making Peter’s eyes grow big with surprise.

“Is that really you, James?” he said, his expression changing, his eyes large. “I didn’t recognize you, you’re so old now.” Peter laughed, throwing his head back, his mouth open wide, just as James remembered him.

“Don’t talk to him, Peter. He’s an adult!” said Rabbit.

“We can’t trust him!” said Cubby. “He’s ruining our game!”

James didn’t understand why his old friends were acting this way. He was finally there and Peter and the Lost Boys hated him.

“Tink says you’re not to be trusted, and I think she’s right!” Peter said, but before James could answer, Smee popped out from behind James, chiming in.

“I assure you Master James is entirely trustworthy, and comes in the spirit of friendship. I have known him his entire life and I know for a fact he has wished for this day for a lifetime.”

Peter narrowed his eyes at Smee, and then looked at James again, contemplating them both. “Go on,” he said, and James couldn’t tell if Peter

seemed intrigued and amused by Mr. Smee, or if he was just humoring him. Either way James was happy Smee had gotten Peter's attention.

"What if I were to tell you three nights from now we were having a splendid party, and that you and your Lost Boys were all invited? There will be music, food, dancing, and games. Will you join us?" asked Smee, smiling. James thought that idea was brilliant and wished he had thought of it himself.

"Food and games you say?" asked Peter with his hand on his hip.

"Oh yes! The most delicious food you've tasted. Smee here is a splendid cook," said James.

"Will there be cakes?" asked Cubby.

"And jellies? Will there be jellies?" asked one of the Raccoon Twins.

"How about candy? Do you have any chocolate?" asked Foxy.

"And chocolate cake? Will there be chocolate cake?" asked Peter.

"Yes, my friends, the biggest chocolate cake you have ever seen! Please join us. I promise it will be a night to remember," said James, smiling.

"Very well. We will see you then," Peter said with a mischievous grin.

"Delightful! And Tinker Bell, you, too, are most welcome, I do hope you will join us," James said, returning the smile and devising his plan to kidnap Tinker Bell.

Chapter XIII

The Song of the Sirens

Smee provided James with the perfect opportunity to capture Tinker Bell with his suggestion to host a party for the Lost Boys, but he needed to plan carefully. James didn't want Peter to know he was involved. He felt terrible, really, starting off like this, deceiving his friends in this way. He wished he was just throwing a party for his friends to show them he could be trusted, but he hadn't been smart about his arrival at Never Land, landing right there in the lagoon in front of Peter and the Lost Boys. If he hadn't been so excited to see them, so happy to be home again, he would have thought better of announcing his return. He should have been more stealthy, showed up in secret, and hidden himself away, and *then* found a way to capture Tinker Bell. But it was too late for stealthy plans; Peter knew he was there and he had to make the best of the situation.

The crew was thrilled that James had suggested they dock the *Jolly Roger* at a daunting island in the shape of a skull. "It's the perfect pirate hideout! I bet there is no other crew with digs like this."

“Imagine all the treasure we can hide in there. We don’t ever have to worry about another crew taking our loot.”

Skylights also seemed to approve of Never Land. “We can use Never Land as our home base between campaigns, if you think it’s safe, Captain. Who else is here aside from the Lost Boys?”

James didn’t know how to break it to the crew that he wasn’t intending to leave Never Land, not once he was back from taking Tinker Bell to the Many Kingdoms. He didn’t want anything to distract them from their plan, and he wasn’t ready for all the questions the crew would have if he told them he had no intention of remaining a pirate.

“No sense in camping on Skull Island when we have everything we need on the ship. Let’s focus on our plan to capture Tinker Bell, and getting her to the Many Kingdoms, and then we will be free to decide what to do next.”

The men seemed satisfied with that answer, and none of them were the sorts who shied away from a bit of skullduggery, so they were keen on James’s plan. “All right, men, I’m going to check in on Mr. Smee.”

James found him in the galley surrounded by bubbling pots cooking on the fire. “Smee, my old friend, I see you’re already at work preparing for the party! Is there anything in here that would make someone sleep?” James was poking around at the various spices and teas in the pantry. He could see he was annoying his old friend. “What’s the matter with you, man? Am I disturbing your system? Have I thrown everything out of order?” asked James, smiling.

“I’m sorry, sir, but yes. Please, let me,” Smee said, going the pantry. “I know Captain Blackbeard had a sleeping draft in his tea every evening before bed; just let me locate it. Though I’m not sure how effective it was, as he never seemed to sleep. Why do you ask?” he said, pushing past James and locating the bottle and handing it to him.

“Would this be enough to make all the Lost Boys fall asleep?” James asked, holding up the bottle.

“I’d say not, but we have more. Blackbeard always made sure I kept it well-stocked,” said Smee, narrowing his eyes. “What do you have in mind, sir?” he asked.

“I want you to make the most magnificent, most delicious, and most enticing chocolate cake, and I want you to lace it with this sleeping draft. We are going to catch ourselves a fairy!”

“Excuse me for saying so, sir, but this is foolhardy! Peter and the Lost Boys will know it was you. I don’t trust those Odd Sisters, and I can’t believe you agreed to this insane plan of theirs.”

“We’ve gone over this, Smee. What choice did I have? It was the only way to make sure my mother would be taken care of. If you saw her, Mr. Smee, you’d understand why I had to make a deal with the Odd Sisters, but the only way they will agree to give me my fondest wish is if I agree to bring them Tinker Bell.”

“I thought you got your fondest wish; we’re in Never Land! It’s all you’ve ever wanted.” Smee furrowed his brow.

James was surprised. He had thought that if anyone knew his secret heart’s desire, it would be Smee. “There is one other thing I want above all things, and Lucinda has promised she has the power to make it so. Besides, Peter won’t know. While everyone is asleep I will use Tinker Bell’s dust to get us to the Many Kingdoms so I can deliver her to Lucinda. By the time everyone wakes, we will be back, and we will pretend we had been put to sleep as well, and act just as surprised as they are that Tinker Bell is missing. Peter won’t suspect a thing. It’s brilliant!” said James, looking very pleased with himself.

“But is it right to take Tinker Bell against her will?”

“She was sent here against her will, Smee, taken from the home she loves. I’m taking her back to where she belongs.”

“Are you sure she isn’t from Pixie Hollow?”

“Pixie Hollow?” James didn’t know what he was talking about.

“You told me about it countless times as a child. You don’t remember? You said it was the secret heart of Never Land, where all the fairies are born.”

James didn’t remember; as far as he knew Tinker Bell was the only fairy in Never Land.

“I don’t know, Smee. I’m not an expert on fairy lore. Lucinda says Tinker Bell is from the Fairylands in the Many Kingdoms but doesn’t remember. She says her memory will return once she is home again.”

“I don’t know, Master James. I think you should have dealt with Circe. From what you’ve told me it doesn’t sound like Lucinda can be trusted. Besides, Tinker Bell seems very fond of Never Land, and of Peter, so is it fair to take her away?”

James didn’t understand where Smee had gotten all of this.

“How do you know so much about Never Land, Smee?”

“From you of course, Master James. You talked of nothing else as a child.”

“Well, nevertheless, Circe doesn’t have the power to give me what I truly want, and her mother does, and that is the last we will say of it,” said James, not giving Smee the opportunity to ask him any more questions.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then it’s settled,” James said, smiling. “I was going to ask if you have everything you need, but it looks like we have more than enough.” James looked at the piles of provisions Smee had picked up while they were in the Many Kingdoms. “Ask as many men as you need to help you with the preparations for the party. Smee, I want this to be perfect.”

“Don’t you worry, sir. I have it all well in hand.”

They had three days before the big party, and James knew Smee would do everything in his power to make sure it was a success, even if he did have his concerns. The fact was, James shared them. He couldn’t stop thinking of the ladies of the Dead Woods. He kept seeing Circe’s face, and felt a deep sense of shame in betraying her, but she couldn’t give him what he truly wanted—she had said so. It made sense to him that her mothers would be more powerful and it would be within their grasp to give him his greatest wish. But Circe’s warnings about her mothers kept creeping into his mind, and he worried he had made a terrible mistake. The fact was, the longer he was in Never Land, the more uncertain he was about everything. He wished he could feel the way he had when his ship was making its descent, when he didn’t have a care in the world, but now fear was creeping into his heart—and he had a deep, abiding sense that it had been lingering there far longer than he would have liked to admit. Ever since he put on his boot buckles.

Was Blackbeard right? Was James afraid to realize his dream? Was he truly afraid of getting his wish from Lucinda for fear it wouldn’t meet his expectations? Things certainly hadn’t gone as he would have liked so far. Peter and the Lost Boys weren’t at all happy to see him, and now he was going to trick them so he could kidnap Tinker Bell.

Maybe Smee was right. Perhaps he was going about this all the wrong way, and the fear of how it might go all wrong was mounting within him, making his heart pound like a ticking clock.

After checking in with the men once more to make sure they were clear on their plan for the night of the party, he decided to distract himself from his worries by exploring the neighboring areas around Skull Rock. Since Never Land was comprised of islands, James took a small boat and ventured

out. He never forgot how beautiful it was in Never Land or the feeling it gave him when he was there. All cities had their own heartbeat, their own soul, but this was greater than the difference between how one may feel in the country as opposed to the city—this was another world, and it felt like coming home.

Skull Rock was situated near the Hangman's Tree, the entrance to where the Lost Boys lived. James could see the large dead tree from his boat, and he wondered what Peter and the Lost Boys were doing now. On the other side of Skull Rock was the Mermaid Lagoon. Determining it was best to stay out of Peter and the Lost Boys' way until the party, he decided he would pay the mermaids a visit.

It was strange for James to be back in the place he considered home and feel like an outsider, to feel like he didn't belong, but he guessed that would all change once he brought Tinker Bell back to the Many Kingdoms and Lucinda granted him his final wish. Even though he had already waited a lifetime for all this to happen, three more days felt like an eternity. In three days he would get what he always truly wanted. As his ship glided into the Mermaid Lagoon, he could hear the voices of the mermaids talking to one another, their lilting voices instantly bringing back the memories of visiting them when he was a small boy.

Mermaid Lagoon was an almost entirely hidden rock pool, and its waters were deep blue. As James approached he saw several mermaids on their rocks gazing up at the evening sky while listening to the splash of the waterfall behind them, illuminated by the moonlight. He couldn't believe he was actually there, and that his memories of the place had remained so vivid in his imagination for all these years. He just sat there in his boat watching them, and taking in the beauty of the lagoon, feeling a rush of happiness in his heart to be in the place he had longed to be for so many years.

"We know you're lurking there, James. Come over and say hello," said one of the mermaids. She had long dark hair and eyes with features so delicate and cute, she reminded James of a little rabbit.

"Good evening to you, ladies. Please forgive me for disturbing you," he said, smiling at the mermaids. And it suddenly hit James in that moment that Never Land was real. He didn't understand why it hadn't hit him before; perhaps it was the excitement of finally being there again, and seeing his old friends Peter and the Lost Boys, but something about seeing the mermaids, these almost magical beings that weren't part of his own world, made it all seem real. He hadn't realized how much he had let his parents make him

doubt himself or his memories, and though he staunchly pursued his dream, he realized there was a tiny bit of him that wondered if it wasn't all in his imagination. But he was really there. He was in Never Land and he couldn't be happier.

"So, you found your way back to Never Land after all these years," said a mermaid with golden hair and an impish smile. She was splashing her tail in the rock pool as a cat might flick its tail when agitated.

"We all wondered if you would ever make your way back. But I guess Peter was right, he knew you'd find Never Land again," said a ginger-haired mermaid giving him the side-eye.

James didn't understand why no one in Never Land seemed happy to see him again. Though only flashing, his memories of Never Land were always good, and he started to wonder if it wasn't his impression of Never Land he was wrong about, but he reminded himself that everything would be better in three days.

"What do you mean?" James squinted to see which of the mermaids had said that. It was dark in the lagoon, and the light of the moon was now obscured by clouds.

"I remember your wailing the day you were claimed; it was terrible, and hurt my ears. I have to admit I was happy when your mother finally found you."

"But your cries were nothing compared to your poor mother's. We could hear her all the way from the Labyrinth of Longing, crying your name again and again," said the dark-haired mermaid. "I wonder if she is there now?"

"Don't be silly. James isn't a Lost Boy. Only the mothers of Lost Boys are trapped in the labyrinth," said the golden-haired mermaid.

"What are you talking about?" asked James. "What is this labyrinth?" James didn't remember any such place, and he was sure the mermaids were teasing him.

"What are you doing in Never Land anyway, James? There's nothing for you here. Peter and the Lost Boys won't trust you; you're an adult. It seems like a foolish journey to make all the way from London," said the ginger-haired mermaid.

"Peter does trust me. We're old friends." James could see the mermaids didn't believe him, and he couldn't blame them; he wasn't sure he believed his own words. "And if he doesn't, then I am sure he will soon. I will prove to him I am his friend."

The mermaids laughed. “Is that what you think you’re doing here, James? Making friends?”

James wished he had just stayed back at the ship. With every encounter he had in Never Land he felt more alone, and the mermaid was right—he *was* there to make friends, but now he felt foolish for thinking Peter or anyone in Never Land would embrace him as such. He had spent his life alone, he had no friends growing up except for Mr. Smee, he didn’t have time for them, and the few people he did try to get to know didn’t understand him or his obsession with Never Land. Now he was starting to wonder if he had wasted his life, and missed opportunities because his entire focus growing up was finding Never Land again, and now he was an adult and no one there liked him. It was like he was the villain of a fairy tale, the dreaded pirate, and that was not the role he wanted to play in this story. He wanted to talk to Circe, even if it meant facing her disappointment in him.

“You have no friends here, James, with no way home. You might as well see if you can find your way back through the labyrinth. If you listen closely you can hear all the mothers of the Lost Boys crying for their sons, endlessly searching for them,” said the dark-haired mermaid. “Their mournful song carries on the wind to our lagoon.”

“Where is this place?” asked James.

“You should remember. You wandered in there. That is how your mother found you so many years ago,” said the impish mermaid, laughing at him.

“Tell me where it is!” he demanded, getting angry. “Don’t play games with me.”

“It’s hidden, of course. Peter doesn’t want the other Lost Boys wandering in lest they be claimed as well,” said the fair-haired mermaid.

“Then why was I allowed into the labyrinth?” demanded James.

“That is a question for Peter,” said the bunny-faced mermaid.

“You lie!” said James. “Peter didn’t send me away!” He turned his little boat around to leave the lagoon.

“Believe as you like, James. But if you want to know the truth you simply have to listen carefully, and follow the sounds of the Heartbroken, and you will find the labyrinth.”

“Poppycock!”

James could hear the sounds of the mermaids’ laughter as he rowed from the lagoon, and wondered what he was doing there. He had risked his life to get to Never Land, and everyone there seemed to hate him no matter

what he did. *Everything will be fine in three days,* he kept telling himself. *Everything will be as it was meant to be.* But he couldn't stop thinking of Circe's warnings, and he was starting to fear she was right.

Later that night James tossed and turned in his bed, wondering if what the mermaids had said was true. The idea of the Lost Boys' mothers endlessly searching for their sons was a horrible thought. He had never considered what it must have been like for his mother all those years ago; he had only thought of himself. He had spent his life resenting his mother for claiming him, and now he couldn't help but think of her alone in London, grieving for her dead husband, and for her son who had abandoned her. And what of Peter's and the Lost Boys' mothers? Were they, too, grieving for their lost sons? Had so much time passed that they were mere spirits trapped forever in the labyrinth, searching for their sons? The idea sent a shiver through James. He pulled up his blankets tight under his chin, and tried to banish these horrid thoughts from his head, and remember what was important:

He was back in Never Land, at long last, and soon he would have what he truly wanted. Friends.

Chapter XIV

Mirrors and Madness

A terrifying scream echoed through the Many Kingdoms, and all who heard it knew Circe was awakened by a nightmare. The Dead Woods was shrouded in darkness except for the glow of the golden flowers that illuminated the headstones, crypts, and their weeping angels as the queens of that land sighed in despair.

Circe woke in her chamber of mirrors, afraid for James and what might befall him in Never Land. In her dream she saw James bleeding and alone, his heart broken and full of rage, and he was calling out to her, and she regretted not trying harder to keep him in the Dead Woods. Circe had been using the dreamscape to sleep since the breaking of the worlds. The only way she could rest was by using a sleeping enchantment, else she be plagued by the terrorizing events with her mothers. For those familiar with the many stories in the Book of Fairy Tales, this is the Chamber of Mirrors in which Aurora slumbered while under the sleeping curse set upon her by her mother, Maleficent. It is where everyone who is under a sleeping enchantment goes, though most don’t remember being there afterward, which is a blessing—

because for those who learn to wield the magic of the mirrors they often see things they wish they hadn't. Imagine if Aurora remembered what happened to her while in the Chamber of Dreams. The horrors and truths she learned would haunt her forever. We still wonder what would have happened if Maleficent hadn't put that sleeping curse on her daughter. Would she have turned into a dragon as her mother had on her sixteenth birthday, and set the lands ablaze? We still mourn what might have been with Aurora. All that magic stuffed away deep inside her, we sometimes wonder what would happen if we should decide to awaken it. But unlike Aurora, and the others who came to slumber in the Chamber of Mirrors, Circe remembered. It was the only way to let her body rest, while her mind constantly hummed with magic.

The chamber was comprised of innumerable mirrors, all of them windows into other worlds. Circe could see anyone or any place she desired; all she had to do was say their name. "Show me Lucinda."

Circe flinched when she saw the mirror crack like a lightning bolt, shattering her mother's image into three, even though now she only had one mother rather than three. A painful reminder that Ruby and Martha were no longer physically with them.

"Mother! Why are you doing this to James?" Circe's face was fierce and her voice was full of rage. Circe hated summoning her mother in the mirror, and speaking to her these days only brought Circe pain.

"Are you so lost you've forgotten how time works in the worlds outside of the Dead Woods?" said Lucinda. "Time is a construct, and in order to understand it mortals need to see it in a straight line, even though for us all time lines are happening concurrently. For James, his story came before Lady Tremaine's, and her story came before Cruella's. How else would Cruella's father have found the earrings, and the Book of Fairy Tales, and Lord and Lady Tremaine find the brooch?"

"Are you not contented by all you have destroyed in the Many Kingdoms that you have to lure victims from distant lands to do the same to them with your deceit? First Cruella, then Lady Tremaine, and now James." Circe was exhausted, and heartbroken that even now with her mother locked away she was still trying to undo the damage they caused.

"We tried to help Lady Tremaine. We gave her the power to protect her heart. If not for the brooch she would have crumbled into despair, and she would have never had the courage to rid herself of that horrible man," said Lucinda.

Circe saw some truth in that. Even if the logic was twisted, she understood why her mother felt that way.

"You mean you *will* try to help her," said Circe.

"*Have*, *will*, it's all the same, Circe. All time happens at once, you most of all know this to be true, even though you seem to resist it," said Lucinda, sneering at her daughter. Circe missed how it was when she was in the Place Between with her mothers. She had sacrificed herself to make her mothers whole again. She had broken her cousin Snow White's heart by leaving the world of the living in order to save the Many Kingdoms so she and everyone else Circe loved could live, and she finally had her mothers back. They were the women they would have been had they not given Circe the best parts of themselves to create her all those years ago. Their times in the Place Between were the happiest in her memory, and she wanted those days with Lucinda, Ruby, Martha, and their cat, Pflanze, to last forever. She would have loved to spend eternity sitting in their old house at the kitchen table with the view of Grimhilde's apple tree in the large, round window, laughing with her mothers, finally and truly enjoying their company, because they were at last the women they were meant to be, not the twisted monsters they became after giving those pieces of themselves away. But it wasn't their fate. It all went terribly wrong, and now there was nothing between them but resentment and heartbreak.

"Why does it say in the Book of Fairy Tales that the Circe who came before me was a little girl when she was killed in the Fairylands, when she was clearly a grown woman when she appeared to Lady Tremaine in the ballroom?"

"Are you searching the Book of Fairy Tales, trying to find a way to save James? Well it won't work. And as for the Circe who came before you, the answer is in your heart. She was an extremely accomplished witch and more powerful than you could fathom. But you are too afraid to see the stories written on your soul, and therefore the truth eludes you."

"She was a witch, and very much like you, Ruby, and Martha: scheming, false, and cruel," said Circe, feeling ashamed that the woman she was named for was just like her mothers.

"Circe was a great witch; I won't have you speaking against her. She would have never betrayed me as you have," said Lucinda, hissing.

"But she did betray Lady Tremaine. She put a spell on her to cloud her judgment that rushed her into a marriage with that horrible man. She felt the inklings of it as you ushered her to her doom," said Circe.

“Are you living your life literally, then? Tethered to one time line?” asked Lucinda, tilting her head to one side with wide, inquisitive eyes.

“I can stay in one time if I focus hard enough. But I allowed myself to see Lady Tremaine’s and Cruella’s stories because I felt they had a deep connection to James’s. If I can stop James from doing what you wish perhaps I can save Lady Tremaine and Cruella, as well as James. But all of these stories happened before Maleficent’s, so tell me, why is it written that your daughter Circe was a little girl when she died in the Fairylands?”

“I would think that is obvious. She enchanted herself to appear young. If she hadn’t the fairies would never have trusted her,” said Lucinda.

“I told myself all these years that your sister Circe was like me, that you created me in her image, but it seems she was treacherous and cruel just like you!”

“She is not the villain of that story, Circe—Fairy Godmother and Nanny are! You saw her story! Lady Tremaine pleaded with them for help and they refused her!” said Lucinda, sneering at her daughter.

“I agree, and I plan to take that up with Nanny and Fairy Godmother. Many lives are at stake here, and James is the key. Cruella could be traveling the world now; instead she is locked away in Hell Hall reliving the nightmare that was her life. And poor Lady Tremaine suffered unspeakably. She should have stayed in London to live out her life happily, but you sent that scheming odious witch to bring her here, and now she’s trapped forever in Cinderella’s old chateau, forever motionless, like one of the weeping angels in my garden. It all comes down to James,” said Circe.

“What do you mean, she is motionless?” asked Lucinda, twitching with anger.

“I thought you knew. Fairy Godmother turned her into a statue. She was beyond redemption. She was abusing her daughters; they lived in terror, and suffered constantly at their mother’s hand. There was no alternative,” said Circe.

“And you let your precious fairies do this? You, who advocate for everyone to have a fairy godmother? You would put them in the hands of those monsters?” asked Lucinda.

“How dare you lay this on me! This happened while we were all in the Place Between. None of this would be happening if it weren’t for you.”

“All of it was meant to happen, Circe. That’s what you’re failing to understand. It was written,” said Lucinda.

“Because you wrote it!” said Circe.

“Why are you asking me these questions, Circe? These stories are written on your soul; why are you afraid to see all time at once? You may be the most powerful witch in these lands, but your power comes from me, my girl, and you still don’t understand the true nature of the Book of Fairy Tales. But you soon will. Mind your dreams, Circe. James’s fate is sealed.”

Chapter XV

Let Them Eat Cake

It had been three days since James and his crew landed in Never Land, and two since the mermaids taunted him with lies and half-truths about Peter Pan and the Labyrinth of Longing. He didn't want to believe what they said about Peter—everyone knew the mermaids in Never Land were impetuous, nasty creatures—but he had a hard time thinking of anything else in the days leading up to the party for the Lost Boys, because now more than ever it was imperative that his plan to capture Tinker Bell and bring her back to the Many Kingdoms worked out perfectly. Only then could he be truly happy. Only then would Lucinda grant his wish, and if the mermaids were to be believed then he would need her magic at his side. His dreams were filled with the images of ghostly mothers shrouded in veils pushing empty prams and wailing for their lost sons, endlessly searching, trapped within the maze, their hearts breaking with every turn of a corner, only to find their sons not there.

If it weren't for the impending party and the preparations, he felt he would have gone quite mad, his mind filled with the sorrowful calls of the

Lost Boys' mothers, and the thought of his own mother grieving for the loss of James and his father. Smee did his best to keep James's mind from his troubles by coming to him for this or that when making ready for the party, and James appreciated it, even when it was clear Smee was just trying to distract him. As much as James missed Blackbeard, he was happy to have Smee at his side. But that is where Smee had always been, ever there to support him, since he was a little boy, like a father. Always there to make him laugh, or listen to one of his stories, or share something interesting he had read, and James loved him for it.

As the days passed, James felt himself growing more fearful. His mind was invaded by the numerous ways his plan could go wrong, and he worried he had gone about all of this the wrong way. James couldn't remember ever feeling so fearful, and decided to take to his cabin and sit in the quiet and try to clear his mind.

"Master James, it's not like you to worry like this." Smee was standing in his doorway with a cup of tea. The steam was swirling from the cup like a bubbling witches' brew, bringing Circe to mind. She was often on his mind; he feared everything she had said was true. "Your plans always work, James. You're the smartest person I know. I'm sure you've thought it all out, and it will go just as you like."

James knew Smee was just trying to make him feel better.

"You said you thought it was a bad plan, and I'm starting to think so, too. I can't account for this terrible feeling of fear that has been washing over me. It's all-consuming, Mr. Smee; I don't know what to do."

Smee frowned. "All right, Master James, this is what we're going to do. Why don't you let me smarten up your frock coat and polish those shoes and buckles. We'll get you looking like the brave pirate I know you are. Come on now, off with them, and you take a nice nap." James felt like he was a little boy again being bossed around by Mr. Smee, and told it was his time for a nap. Often when he was little, his nurse or governess would ring for Mr. Smee because he was the only person James would mind, especially when he wasn't ready to take a nap, or do anything, really, that he didn't want to. But James felt like he needed to be cherished, to be taken care of in this way. "You just lost a very good friend, James, and you've been through so much in a short space of time. You rest, and let Mr. Smee take care of you."

James smiled and took off his coat and shoes as his friend had asked and handed them over, and in that moment he felt a tremendous weight lifted

from him. He felt like he could breathe, and his fear slowly started to slip away. It was as if all his troubles and worry were magically gone once he handed them over, and he felt foolish for having felt the way he did. He shook his head, wondering if Blackbeard was right. He had always felt his coat was a coat for a captain, and the buckles, too, which had been given to him by Blackbeard, had always been a symbol of his duty to his crew and the *Jolly Roger*. Was all of this about being a captain, as Blackbeard had said? Whatever the case, all he wanted in that moment was to sleep like Smee suggested, and that is what he did, until later that evening, a few hours before the party.

He woke to his clothes laid out for him on a large wooden chest. Smee had cleaned his coat, polished his shoes, and made his buckles shine. He had even laid out a clean white shirt, and smartened up the white plume in his hat. James put everything on except the boot buckles, deciding at the last moment to slip them into his desk drawer along with Lucinda's magic mirror. Thankfully this time when he opened it, her face was not looking back at him, but he closed the drawer quickly all the same for fear she might appear. He looked at himself in the long foggy mirror next to the wooden chest and liked what he saw, and he felt his nap had been exactly what he needed, and he was ready for the party, and what came next.

The *Jolly Roger* shone brightly against the dark sky, all of the lanterns aflame and glowing through the many windows of the ship, as fireflies danced to music being played by Mullins, Skylights, and Jukes. The men were having a grand time; James felt they deserved a bit of fun after their ordeals with the Kraken and the loss of Blackbeard. James liked to see the men happy and enjoying themselves. He hardly had a moment to really take it in that this was his crew, and his ship, since everything that happened after he left Blackbeard in the Floating Boneyard had all happened so fast. Blackbeard was right when he said the men would do anything for him after he saved their lives by defeating the Kraken; it seemed they would follow him to the ends of the earth if he asked. When he told them they were coming to Never Land, he didn't hear one protest, and they were all on board when he told them about his plans to spirit Tinker Bell off to the Many Kingdoms. Of course if all went according to plan, the men would go their own way once James delivered Tinker Bell to Lucinda and he returned to Never Land for good. He couldn't expect the men to want to stay here with him forever. Of course they would be welcome to if they chose, but he didn't see that happening. The men were at their happiest when they were on an

adventure, or mission, and at that moment their mission was to pretend they were friendly pirates throwing a party for their new friends the Lost Boys, and by the looks of it James felt their ruse would do the trick.

James smiled, looking at the band of men playing a jolly little tune while the others danced. He could see the mermaids off in the distance, perched on some rocks. He hadn't invited the mermaids, and wasn't happy to see them, but at least they were keeping to themselves.

Smee had outdone himself preparing the feast for the Lost Boys: there were baked chickens, loaves of hearty bread, hunks of cheese, spiced apple cider, chocolate cookies, little cakes, pastries filled with sweet delicious cream, baked apples with caramel sauce, fruit covered in chocolate, shortbread, sugar cookies, bowls of sweet whipped cream, lemon curd, and of course there was the enormous chocolate cake, though that was still in the galley awaiting its grand entrance once the party was in full swing.

As James requested, Smee had placed the Odd Sisters' iron clock on the center of the table, so James could keep track of how long the sleeping draft would be effective. Everything was going according to plan, except for the mermaids. James regretted having paid them a visit, but had at last managed to banish the terrible images they had conjured in his mind. He was feeling like himself again, brave and capable of pulling just about anything off, no matter how dangerous, just like he had with the Kraken, and with the *Flying Dutchman*. He laughed when he saw Peter Pan flying above the mermaids, doing summersaults in the air, and making them swoon. But he couldn't help but feel jealous of his old friend Peter, who always found it easy to make friends. It was a talent James wished he possessed, especially now that he was in Never Land.

Just then Peter landed on the deck right next to James. He took a look around, and seemed happy with what he saw.

"Hello, pirate!" Peter was eyeing him up and down. "I like your coat. It suits you perfectly."

"Welcome, Peter, I'm so happy you decided to come. Where are the other Lost Boys and Tinker Bell? Smee has made quite the feast for all of you."

"Are you happy, James? I've been talking with the mermaids. They say you aren't happy." Peter was scanning James and the ship suspiciously.

"You know how the mermaids can be. They were just teasing, I'm sure, and I'm afraid I let them get to me. It was such a long journey here, after all." James smiled at Peter. Some of James's memories of Peter and his time

in Never Land as a boy were shrouded as if by a thick mist. Now that he was home again it seemed some of the memories were coming back to him more vividly. One of the things he remembered was feeling at home in Never Land, and he was so happy he was back.

"You look quite at home, pirate," said Peter, smiling. "You seem truly happy to be here, happier to be here than any adult I've met, anyway." And then, putting his fingers in his mouth, he whistled loudly and yelled, "Come on, Lost Boys, it isn't a trap!" and within moments the Lost Boys joined James and Peter on the deck of the ship. James was so happy to be surrounded by his old friends, his heart burst with joy at the sound of their laughter, and the looks of excitement on their faces. This was how he expected to feel the day he arrived. This is why he spent his life trying to find Never Land again, to be with his friends.

"Of course it's not a trap, dear fellow," said James, laughing and feeling guilty that it was exactly that. He wasn't afraid anymore that his plan wouldn't work, but he did feel sorry he was about to betray his friends.

"You remember the Lost Boys," Peter said, and before James could say hello, the little hellions swarmed the banquet tables, making a mess of everything.

"Where's the cake? We were promised chocolate cake!" said Foxy, scouring the table with Cubby and Skunk, throwing the chickens this way and that, making Smee scurry behind them cleaning up their mess. James couldn't help but laugh watching Smee catching chickens as they were tossed in the air.

"Adults always lie! We knew there wouldn't be cake!" said Rabbit, riling up all the Lost Boys, who were now surrounding James with angry faces.

"Yeah, let's leave! There's no cake!" said the Raccoon Twins, stamping their feet with their fists clenched. "We came here for the cake!"

"Calm down, boys, calm down," James said, laughing. "Smee! I think it's time to bring out the cake!" he cried, flourishing his pirate coat like he was onstage and not aboard a ship.

Smee scurried off to the galley, and within moments wheeled out a gigantic chocolate cake, even larger than the one James had gotten from Tiddlebottom's and Butterpants's Bakery for the Odd Sisters. It was covered in heaps of chocolate frosting, and on the top was a large replica of the *Jolly Roger* carved out of chocolate. Smee had even managed to include the skull and crossbones flag. It was a marvel. The Lost Boys nearly knocked Smee

over as they surrounded the cake, making him spin like a dervish before he righted himself.

"Gentleman, please!" cried Smee as he tried to hand them plates, but the Lost Boys had no need of them. They were taking handfuls of cake and shoving them into their mouths greedily, and taking great bites out of the chocolate *Jolly Roger*, making a mess of their hands and faces. James was so happy to see his friends having such a good time, he just stood there laughing, and enjoying the scene, feeling like he was one step closer to befriending Peter and the Lost Boys again. Smee quickly cut two slices of cake, put them on plates, and brought them to Peter and James.

"Here you go, sirs," he said, handing the slices over.

"What's wrong with you? Why do you look so nervous?" asked Peter, eyeing Smee suspiciously.

"It's nothing, young sir, it's only . . ." he said, looking around anxiously. "It's just that a crocodile has been circling the ship. . . . Yes, a crocodile, and I'd hate for any of our spirited friends to fall into the water."

James knew that wasn't what was making Smee anxious, and he wasn't very good at lying, but Peter didn't seem to notice. The fact was James was having so much fun with his friends he had almost forgotten entirely the cake was laced with a sleeping draft, and within moments they were going to have to act fast so they could capture Tinker Bell and spirit her away to the Many Kingdoms.

"Oh, you don't have to worry about him. His lagoon is nearby; he's only come to listen to the music," said Peter, eating his cake.

"Yes, thank you, Smee, I'm sure the Lost Boys are well acquainted with all manner of creatures who live here, don't trouble yourself," said James, wondering where Tinker Bell was. He hadn't planned to serve the cake until after she arrived, but at the rate the Lost Boys were shoveling cake into their mouths, they'd be asleep before she even got there. Then of course she would realize it was a trap. "Where is your fairy friend?" he asked Peter, who answered with a mouth full of chocolate.

"She is there, with the mermaids," Peter said, and James saw her glittering light zoom around them as they sang along to the music the men were playing on the *Jolly Roger*. Mullins, Jukes, Damien Salt, and the other men looked like they were having a wonderful time, too, and he wondered if, like him, they had forgotten their skullduggerous plan.

"She is most welcome to join us, so are the mermaids," said James.

"Mermaids don't eat cake," said Peter, laughing.

“Of course they don’t, how silly of me. Is there something I could offer them? Something more to their taste? I do know, however, that fairies love sweets. Maybe we can tempt Tinker Bell with some of the petit fours; they’re just her size.” James noticed that Peter’s eyes were becoming heavy. Soon he and the Lost Boys would be asleep, and he needed to act fast. He didn’t want to ruin the goodwill he had created this night with his friends, and wished more than ever he could be doing this some other way.

“Oh yes, she loves little cakes. Do you have lemon? That’s her favorite!” Peter asked, and called out to Tinker Bell.

“Tink! Tink! They have little cakes!” he said, then whistled so Tink would fly over. James gave a wink to Smee, his signal to sprinkle a bit of sleeping draft onto Tinker Bell’s cake before he brought it over to her. Tinker Bell was luminescent and feisty as ever. She was such a little thing, small enough to fit into the palm of a hand, and brazen enough to find her way out of it.

“Hello, Tinker Bell, Smee here will be right back with your cakes,” James said, smiling at the fairy. “I’m so happy to see you, to see all of you really. My memories of being here when I was a boy are cloudy, so I’m looking forward to getting to know all of you again. I have been reading about you for years, and I must confess I feel as if we are all good friends.” Tinker Bell just glared at him with her hand on her hip, and he had to wonder if she felt that he was up to something. He knew she didn’t feel he could be trusted, and he supposed she was right—he was after all planning to kidnap her—but at the same time he couldn’t help but feel hurt that she should feel this way when he had done nothing (that she knew of, anyway) to make her distrust him.

“Peter, I’ve always wondered, why are there no Lost Girls in Never Land, and only Lost Boys?” asked James.

“Because girls are far too clever to allow themselves to fall out of their prams,” said Peter, laughing.

Tinker Bell was still giving James the eye. It hurt him that she didn’t trust him, and he thought perhaps it was for the best he was taking her to the Many Kingdoms after all. He didn’t want her standing in the way of his friendship with Peter. “Ah look, here is Smee with Tink’s cakes,” James said as Smee placed the little plate onto the table. Even though the cakes were bite-size for a human, one of them was more than enough for the little tinker-fairy, but Smee had piled the plate high with colorful little cakes, and

James could see he had sprinkled them with the sleeping draft mingled with powdered sugar so she and Peter wouldn't notice.

"And what shall we send your mermaid friends? Is there anything I can tempt them with?" he asked, giving the mermaids the side-eye. He hadn't thought the mermaids would come. He had to think of a way to put them to sleep, otherwise they would see him flying off in the *Jolly Roger* with Tink, Peter, and the Lost Boys.

Tinker Bell sniffed at her cake, wrinkled her nose, and stamped her foot, causing fairy dust to erupt from her tiny feet, and she angrily pointed her finger at Smee.

"The cakes are quite good, my dear, I promise you," said James, but he could tell Tinker Bell was onto him. She had her hands on her hips, and was glaring at him.

"Can I have Smee get you something else?" he asked, but it was too late—Peter and the Lost Boys were all falling asleep on their feet, swaying from side to side. Tinker Bell flew into a tizzy trying to rouse Peter before he and the other Lost Boys fell to the deck with a great thud.

Tinker Bell flew to each of the Lost Boys trying to wake them, but they were all fast asleep. "Blasted fairy!" said James, calling out to Murphy, who was now up in the crow's nest, waiting to throw a net down at his signal. It came cascading down, capturing Tink. She struggled beneath the net, frantically trying to get out, but it was too heavy for the tiny fairy. James still didn't know what to do about the mermaids, but there was no time. He'd have to come up with some kind of story to explain why he left Never Land in such a hurry with everyone on board.

The men stopped their music-playing and frivolity, and positioned themselves at their posts as planned. But James ordered them to continue playing so the mermaids wouldn't catch on that something was amiss. He looked at the iron clock, noting the time. He wanted to make sure they didn't waste too much time before sailing off to the Many Kingdoms, to be sure Peter and the Lost Boys stayed asleep for their trip there and back again. And with the help of Tink's pixie dust, they would get there quickly.

But then something happened he did not expect: the crocodile that had gotten Smee's attention had been joined by a number of his brethren, and they were circling the ship. The crocodile seemed to have eyes only for James. And he knew right then that everything would go wrong.

Within moments James was surrounded by chaos. He wasn't sure how it all happened really; there was a maelstrom of frenzy all around him, and

before he knew it, the mermaids, who were curious about what was going on with the crocodiles, swam over to see what was happening. When they got wind of what James and his crew were up to, they joined the crocodiles and encircled the ship, pushing it and making it rock back and forth. James staggered, losing his footing several times as he made his way past Peter and the Lost Boys, who were still fast asleep. He finally reached Tinker Bell, who was still struggling under the net. He took the knife from his boot, sliced open the net, and reached for Tinker Bell, who bit him sharply on the hand.

"Ouch, you bloody little—" But then both of them went tumbling toward the other end of the ship as the mermaids and crocodiles rocked it so severely that James almost fell into the ocean with Tinker Bell tight in his grip. The banquet tables went sliding past him, dumping the feast into the ocean. With the hand not holding Tinker Bell, he plunged his knife into the deck and held on to keep himself from going overboard.

"Skylights, Mullins, and Smee, protect the Lost Boys and don't let them go overboard!" yelled James. He looked frantically for Peter, but he couldn't find him. "I think Peter is overboard, someone find him!" yelled James as the ship slammed back into its correct position.

Tinker Bell was struggling in James's hand; he was afraid he was squeezing her too tightly, but he couldn't find a jar or container or anything to put her in so she couldn't fly away. He felt stupid for not thinking of that before then. She kept biting his hand, over and over, making him shake her furiously, her magic pixie dust now cascading all over the deck of the ship, causing it to rise into the air. Everything was happening more quickly than he had planned. He wasn't ready to take the ship to the Many Kingdoms; he couldn't leave until he knew Peter and the other Lost Boys were okay, and what was he going to do about the mermaids when he got back?

"Smee, is everyone accounted for?" asked James as the ship lifted from the water. Everything was going terribly wrong, but he was determined to pull it off.

"Everyone is accounted for except for Peter; the mermaids are looking for him now," Smee said. "Sir! What are you doing?" The ship sailed higher into the air. "What of Peter?" Smee said, looking overboard.

James rushed to his side to see if he could see Peter below. "I'm not doing this, Smee. It's the pixie dust. I think it's taking us back to the Many Kingdoms."

“Well, make it stop, sir!” said Smee, squinting to see what was happening below. “We can’t leave without knowing if Peter is okay. And what will we do about the mermaids? They’re bound to tell Peter what we did.”

“They won’t have to!” said a voice from above. James turned around to see Peter flying toward him at great speed, his sword pointing in James’s direction. James had never seen Peter so serious, and so fierce. It threw him off guard, giving him the most unsettling feeling.

“You better let her go, or I will have your head!” said Peter when he landed on the deck of the ship, his sword raised and his face gravely serious. “Tink, Tink! Are you okay?” he yelled. She answered by giving James’s hand another bite.

“Ouch!” said James, letting her go, but she wasn’t quick enough; James was able to snatch her back out of the air. He felt her struggle in his hand as he was fighting off Peter’s attack with his other, and wondered what he was doing. Everything had gone terribly wrong. This wasn’t what he wanted. He had ruined everything; he saw it in Peter’s eyes. He had wanted so badly to be friends—the best of friends—but James was now his enemy.

“Peter, we don’t have to be enemies. This isn’t how it’s supposed to be. All I wanted . . .” But the rest of his words didn’t come—all he knew was the pain. It shot from his hand to the rest of his body like a bolt of lightning. It was a blinding, all-encompassing pain so overwhelming he thought he would pass out.

He wasn’t even sure what had happened until he saw his severed hand tumbling through the air alongside him, still clutching Tinker Bell as they plummeted overboard toward the water below. None of it seemed real. Nothing had since he’d saved Blackbeard from the Kraken, and he wondered as he had several times since if this was all a dream. He wished with all his heart it was. If only he were fast asleep in the Dead Woods, dreaming of the fate he avoided in Never Land, or even back home again with his mother. He wished to be anywhere other than where he was now.

Time seemed to slow as James saw he was getting closer to the water, and the crocodiles waiting for him there, and he made a silent wish that when he died he would somehow be able to join Blackbeard in the Floating Boneyard, but right before James fell into the lagoon the *Jolly Roger* appeared out of nowhere, swooped down, and caught James before he fell to the crocodiles below. James’s hand wasn’t so lucky.

“Tinker Bell!” yelled Peter, diving into the water after a crocodile licking its chops. And James wondered if the beast had eaten the fairy along with his hand.

That was the last thing James saw before everything went black.

Chapter XVI

The Labyrinth of Longing

James woke several days later to find two things: a hook lying on his bedside table, and that he was Peter Pan's enemy. He didn't want either. Smee had managed to get them to a secret part of the island none of the Lost Boys would dare enter: the Labyrinth of Longing. And it sent a penetrating dread into James's already wounded and fearful heart.

"You're finally awake, sir," said Smee, who had been sitting at his bedside. His face was full of worry, his eyes tired and hooded from lack of sleep.

"Take that horrible thing away, Smee. I don't want to look at it," said James, repulsed by the hook sitting on his bedside table.

"Of course, sir," said Smee, putting it in the drawer. "You won't be able to wear it for quite some time, not until you're healed, but Jukes did go to great lengths to make it for you."

"Thank him for me," said James with a weary smile.

"The men will be so relieved to know you're okay. Shall I make you something to eat before you go out and speak to them? I've laid your clothes

out for you so you will look the part when you address your crew. I know they will all want some encouraging words from their captain now that you're up and about," said Smee.

"Yes, I'd like that very much. Thank you. Oh and, Smee, did Tinker Bell survive?"

Smee smiled. "Yes, I believe she did, sir."

After Smee was out of the room, James got out of his nightshirt and put on his pirate garb. Smee had managed to clean the blood from the cuff of his shirt and jacket, and had even managed to salvage his hat, plume still intact. After he was dressed, James went to his desk, where he had been keeping Lucinda's magic mirror and the boot buckles. He opened his drawer, took out the buckles Blackbeard had given him, and fastened them to his black boots. Perhaps if he had been wearing them when he tried to kidnap Tinker Bell he wouldn't have lost his hand, or his friends. Well, he wasn't going to be parted from any of his other friends again. He would keep Blackbeard's memory by wearing the buckles he gave him, and he would always have Smee at his side. He would at least have that.

He wasn't surprised to see Lucinda's face already reflected in the mirror sitting inside the drawer, and he felt a surge of fear wash over him when he saw her cruel and cunning eyes looking at him. "Hello, James."

"Everything went terribly wrong. I wasn't able to capture Tinker Bell."

"I'd say everything went just right." Lucinda was laughing and didn't seem at all surprised to hear this news.

"I lost my hand to Peter trying to capture Tinker Bell for you. And now Peter and the Lost Boys know what I was up to. I don't know how I'm ever going to capture her again." James felt the crushing weight of his failure like an anchor dragging him into the sea.

"We know everything, James. We know about your hand and the crocodile, and we know that Peter and the Lost Boys hate you. It's all written in the Book of Fairy Tales. It's happening as it was always meant to," said Lucinda, her face twitching and distorting. She looked as if she was trying to banish some invisible person, swiping away at them with her hands. James was exhausted and didn't have the patience to deal with Lucinda's madness. All he wanted to do in that moment was die.

"And now that crocodile has a taste for your blood," said a voice from the mirror that was not Lucinda's. It was eerie hearing a voice that sounded exactly like hers but not ushered from her lips. He was trapped in a nightmare with these maddening women, unable to escape.

“Who is that? Who is speaking? What do you mean it has a taste for my blood?” he asked, looking down at his arm again. He could feel the fear and panic inside him growing stronger.

“At least you will hear the beast when he is coming. Your hand isn’t the only thing the crocodile ate that night. It has our clock ticking away in its belly,” said another voice in the mirror that wasn’t Lucinda’s.

“So you never intended to give me my fondest wish, did you?” he asked, looking down at his arm again. “Circe warned me my losses would be great if I came here. I should have listened to her.”

“Yes, James, you should have listened to Circe; she is bound by the truth. I am not,” Lucinda said.

“So, I’m trapped here forever. And everything was for naught.”

“No, James, you helped us a great deal. Without you we would have never been able to get the brooch, earrings, and book to London. When Blackbeard betrayed us by keeping our treasures, we knew it had to be you to help us extend our reach to the mortal world,” said Lucinda, and her laugh was joined by more laughter in the mirror. James knew this had to be her sisters, the Odd Sisters he had heard of on so many occasions.

“At least you kept one promise to Blackbeard, and have found your pirate name, *Captain Hook*,” said Lucinda, her laugh vile and full of contempt.

He slammed his fist on the wood over and over, the sound of the Odd Sisters’ laughter growing louder, making his head swim.

“I wish I could speak to Circe,” he said, lowering his head in despair. “I wish I could tell her I am sorry for betraying her. I wish she were here now,” he said, tears falling down his face.

“I am here, James,” said the familiar voice. James looked up and saw Circe’s face in the mirror. She looked ethereal and lovely, and filled with tremendous sadness.

“Circe? Are you with your mothers? Have you betrayed me as well?”

“No, James. You must have asked the mirror to see me,” said Circe. “I warned you not to trust my mothers.”

James could see she was truly sad for him.

“Oh, Circe, how will I ever get home? Everything went so wrong, this isn’t how it was supposed to happen,” said James.

“It was exactly what was *supposed* to happen, according to my mothers. I wish you had taken the opportunity I gave you to change it, James. I told you there was nothing but loss and heartbreak for you in Never Land, and

you chose that destiny anyway. You chose to believe my mothers, and I am truly sorry for your fate." She looked as if she wanted to reach in through the mirror and comfort him, and James wished with all of his being she could.

"They promised they would make me young again, Circe, make me a Lost Boy. I had to try. You know it was my fondest wish."

"My mothers lied, James. The only person who could grant you that is Peter," said Circe.

"Peter? Why didn't you tell me? I could have just asked him? All I ever wanted was to be his friend," said James.

"I couldn't bring myself to break your heart, James. Peter never wanted you to be a Lost Boy. He was the one who made sure you were claimed all those years ago, the reason you were sent away from Never Land. Oh, how I wish you had met me for the exchange as you promised. With my enchantment you could have flown your ship anywhere you desired. I had hoped once you got to Never Land you would have realized there wasn't a life for you there, and you would have come back to the Dead Woods to live with us. I wanted so badly to change not only your fate but the fate of so many others, but it seems I have again failed." Circe was grief-stricken, and James could see she felt helpless in the face of his sorrow.

"Can't you enchant my ship now, bring it back there or to London?" asked James.

"I wish I could. Your only hope of returning is using Tinker Bell's pixie dust."

"Did your mothers even want Tinker Bell, or was that a lie as well?"

"They knew Peter would do anything to protect her, and they promised Peter an enemy. And now they have it. You."

"Then I am stuck here, forever, just as I wished. Your mothers will find that amusing," he said with a sneer.

"Yes, I daresay they will," she said as her eyes shifted to the left as if she was trying to hear something. James could hear it, too. "What is that sound?" asked Circe.

"We are near the Labyrinth of Longing. What you hear are heartbroken mothers endlessly searching for their lost sons," said James, remembering the story the mermaids told him.

"And what happens if these mothers find their sons?" asked Circe.

"They bring them home," said James, getting an idea.

"No, James, wait," said Circe, reading his mind. "There's something you must know, something I should have told you when you were here . . ."

But before she could continue, James closed the drawer and decided what he must do.

The labyrinth was a dreary place obscured in mist, with ghostly women in black pushing empty prams. Every time James passed one of the mothers she would look up at him with hope in her eyes, only to be disappointed she hadn't found her son. James felt he understood how the labyrinth worked now. These ghostly women were the personifications of these mothers' grief. Imagine one's grief growing so immense that it has to live outside the body, becoming an entity of its own, wandering the mists, searching for the only thing that will repair its broken heart. He wasn't sure how these grieving spirits had made their way to the labyrinth, but he imagined they must have been drawn there by the presence of their sons, and if one of these ghostly mothers were to find her son in the maze she was somehow able to bring him home again, as his mother had done with him so many years ago. He doubted his mother remembered it ever happening, and that he attributed to the magic of Never Land. There was no other answer.

He searched the labyrinth for hours, calling out to his mother again and again, hoping she would find him this time as well, his voice becoming hoarse, and his heart losing hope. He was exhausted and cold, and he had managed to reopen his wound, which was now bleeding rather freely, but he didn't care—he had decided this would be the place he would die. He fell to the ground, weeping in despair, and called out to Circe, but she couldn't hear him. He didn't have the magic mirror. He would die alone.

And then James saw him, Peter Pan, escorting a small boy into the labyrinth. "Yes, just go that way, your mother will find you," Peter said, tousling the boy's hair before he went off running into the maze, looking happy to be going home again. James heard mother and son's happy reunion off in the distant mist, and it penetrated his heart with a tiny glimmer of hope that he might still find his mother.

"I'm surprised to see you in the labyrinth, Peter," said James, taking Peter by surprise. "Aren't you afraid of being claimed?"

Peter just smiled in his impish way and shook his head. "Neither of our mothers is here, James. They are both well past living," said Peter.

And James remembered that time worked differently in other worlds. He had been in Never Land so long now that his mother was dead.

"Then I am truly alone," said James.

"You're not alone; you have Mr. Smee, and your band of pirates."

But that was of no consolation to James. It made him feel worse knowing he had doomed his friend Smee to being stuck in Never Land.

"Why didn't you want me to be a Lost Boy, Peter? Why wasn't I good enough?" asked James.

"Because what we needed was a pirate. Someone to make our adventures more exciting, raise the stakes, and now we have that," said Peter, and he rose into the air as if floating on his own laughter.

"How could you have known back then I would become a pirate if you turned me away?" But James was sure he already knew the answer.

"I met the Odd Sisters a very long time ago on one of my adventures beyond the worlds. I gave them some of Tink's pixie dust in exchange for my shadow, and that is when I learned about you, and how everything that is meant to be is already written, and who am I to go against fairy stories?"

James wanted to scream out. He wanted to rage, maim, and murder. He wanted to be everything a pirate was supposed to be. He wanted revenge, on the Odd Sisters and on Peter Pan, for the ruin of his life.

"Don't be sad, James. We have so many adventures ahead of us. Soon I will be bringing three siblings here, the Darlings from London. I've had my eye on them for some time. Between them and your band of pirates, things will be really exciting around here, just you wait and see," said Peter, laughing, doing flips in the air. "And of course there is the crocodile." Peter smirked.

"Where? Is he here?" said James, looking around frantically, making Peter laugh even harder. James didn't recognize himself. He was full of fear and rage, and with every word Peter spoke he felt it growing larger within him, pushing everything he valued in himself away, because there was no more room for James.

"Oh yes, this is going to be great fun. Welcome to Never Land, *Captain Hook*." And with that, Peter flew up and away from the labyrinth, out of sight.

Captain Hook realized that everyone had been right. You can't change fairy stories, no matter how hard you try. He was never supposed to be a Lost Boy. His destiny was always to be a pirate. The bad guy.

If Peter wanted an adversary, that’s exactly what he would get, and he knew what he had to do.

Kill Peter Pan.

Circe stood in front of the broken mirror that had been split into three pieces in the Chamber of Mirrors and demanded her mother appear to her. She was filled with so much rage it frightened her.

"I am here, daughter. I take it you've learned you and Hook were unable to rewrite his story." Lucinda's face appeared in each broken shard of the mirror, reminding Circe of when she had three mothers and not just one. She missed Ruby and Martha, and longed for the time they had been all together in the Place Between.

"I thought making you whole again, repairing the damage your own mother did to you by splitting you into three, would restore you, Mother, but I see you are still as misguided and cruel as ever. We were given a choice; why did you throw it away?" said Circe, wondering why her mother had cast her out of the Place Between.

"And what choice was that, daughter? Stay in the Place Between forever, move beyond the veil and spend our afterlife with our ancestors who betrayed us, or become this? And you made the choice for me, didn't you?

Fusing Martha, Ruby, and me together again. It wasn't your choice to make. And that is why we cast you out! All this for some childish notion that I would be whole again, and we would be a happy family of witches together. I will never be whole; my soul has been split so many times I am beyond being simply Lucinda again. Ruby and Martha live within me—they are inside me, as we are inside *you*," said Lucinda, her head twitching as if she was trying to shake off an intrusive thought, and Circe was sure it was Ruby and Martha wishing for their voices to be heard as well.

"We are so curious, our daughter, did you curse James's boot buckles?" The voice was Ruby's, and it made Circe frightened and sad to hear her voice but not be able to see her. She saw only the face of Lucinda looking back at her. Her mothers would never know how guilty she felt for having joined them together again. She knew when she did it that it meant she would never see Ruby and Martha again, but at the time she felt it was the only way to save her mothers and preserve their sanity. The only way to bring them back to the world of the living.

"I wouldn't say curse. I just imbued them with a healthy dose of fear," said Circe, not being able to meet the look of satisfaction on her mother's face.

"Look at the great and kind Circe, casting fear curses, hoping to strike fear into poor James's heart."

"I hoped it would keep him from going to Never Land. I hoped it would save him from you," said Circe.

"Did you tell him what Never Land truly is, that he and his pirate friends didn't survive the battle with the Kraken?" Circe hated how much delight her mother was taking in all of this, but she swallowed her rage and pushed it down deep within herself, even though she knew it was dangerous to do so. If she hadn't she would have reached into the mirror and pulled her mother out, ending all of this at last. But she knew that would be the final breaking of her already shattered soul.

"I should have told him when he came to me in the Dead Woods. That's why we tried to make him stay."

Lucinda laughed. "Just as it was written. But it's all tangled, isn't it? All these stories, one wouldn't happen without the other. And thanks to you Hook will be the cowardly pirate he was meant to be, an eternal plaything for Peter and his Lost Boys. Forever lost in Never Land."

THE END

Table of Contents

Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Prologue
Chapter I
Chapter II
Chapter III
Chapter IV
Chapter V
Chapter VI
Chapter VII
Chapter VIII
Chapter IX
Chapter X
Chapter XI
Chapter XII
Chapter XIII
Chapter XIV
Chapter XV
Chapter XVI
Epilogue